

# Phonetic salience and language change: Verb paradigms in Inari Sami

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**Abstract:** This paper presents data on Inari Sami verb morphology. Two informants differ from other speakers in that they have merged the second person dual and plural endings in the present tense paradigm. The two speakers use different endings: one of them uses the former dual ending whereas the other uses the former plural ending. The explanation for how the relevant changes which led to the present systems took place will rely crucially on an acquisition-based theory of historical change.

## 1 Introduction

Inari Sami is one of the three Sami languages that are still spoken in Northern Finland. There remain about 400 speakers, who are all bilingual in Inari Sami and Finnish. Most of the speakers do not read or write Inari Sami, and they have not studied it in school in any form: the language has been maintained orally.<sup>1</sup> There are significant dialectal differences between villages where the language is spoken, and there are also interesting idiolectal differences. This is not surprising, since there is no written tradition and no agreed-upon norm. This sociolinguistic setting is very interesting for the linguist who is interested in microdialects and language change. In this paper, we will examine two particular cases of morphological variation. It will be argued that the changes that have led to this variation are best explained if *language acquisition* and *phonetic salience* are taken into account.

## 2 Second person dual and plural

In the speech of most Inari Samis, and also in the Inari Sami dictionaries (Sammallahti and Morottaja 1993, Itkonen et al. 1986), the second person

dual ending is *-vettee* and the second person plural ending is *-vetteδ* in the present tense verb paradigm. This is seen in examples (1-2).<sup>2</sup>

- (1) *Tuoi kuáláástvettee onne.*  
 you.DUAL fish.2DUAL today  
 ‘(The two of) you are fishing today.’

- (2) *Tiij kuáláástvetteδ onne.*  
 you.PLURAL fish.2PLURAL 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 *-vetteδ* for both.<sup>3</sup> Below we see the complete present tense paradigm as elicited from Speaker A, Speaker B, and other informants.<sup>4</sup>

- (3) *kuáláástiδ* ‘to fish’

		SPEAKER A	SPEAKER B
Sg	1	kuáláástam	kuáláástam
	2	kuáláástah	kuáláástah
	3	kuáláást	kuáláást
Du	1	kuáláásteen	kuáláástáán
	2	<b>kuáláástvettee</b>	<b>kuáláástvettee</b> <b>kuáláástvetteδ</b>
	3	kuáláástava	kuáláástava
Pl	1	kuáláástep	kuáláástâp
	2	<b>kuáláástvetteδ</b>	<b>kuáláástvettee</b> <b>kuáláástvetteδ</b>
	3	kuáláásteh	kuáláásteh

Note that there are some similarities between Speakers A and B which are not shared with the other speakers. (e.g. *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 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 certain of two things. First, in the PLD, both the ending *-vettee* and the ending *-vetteð* existed, so their parents were most probably speaking the dialect of most speakers of today; that is, they 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, than A and B should have the same ending for dual and plural, but they do not: one has *-vettee* and the other *-vetteð*.

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

(4) *lávluð* ‘to sing’

	SPEAKER A		SPEAKER B
Du 2	lávluvettee	lávluvettee	lávluvetteð
Pl 2	lávluvetteð	lávluvettee	lávluvetteð

(5) *sárnuð* ‘to speak’

	SPEAKER A		SPEAKER B
Du 2	sárnuvettee	sárnuvettee	sárnuvetteð
Pl 2	sárnuvetteð	sárnuvettee	sárnuvetteð

(6) *tubdâð* ‘to know; to feel’

	SPEAKER A		SPEAKER B
Du 2	tubdâvettee	tubdâvettee	tubdâvetteð
Pl 2	tubdâvetteð	tubdâvettee	tubdâvetteð

Examples (7-9) show the verb *tubdâð* 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 tubdâvetteδ 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:

- (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 *tubdâδ* used in a second person plural context. First speaker A:

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

Example (11) is a quote from Speaker B.

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

Finally, example (12) is spoken by a third informant.

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

In sentences (7-12) above, it is clear from the context whether the number is dual or plural. We see that Speaker A consistently uses the ending *-vettee* and Speaker B uses the ending *-vetteδ* in both contexts. 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 Phonetic Salience

How do we explain the changes that have happened? One speaker has lost the final  $[\delta]$ , while the other speaker has added an  $[\delta]$  to a morpheme that previously ended in a vowel. 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

When one first encounters the data presented in Section 2, one might hypothesize that the dual/plural distinction in general is disappearing in Inari Sami, at least for some speakers. One might expect that some speakers, at least Speaker 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 Inari Sami, for all speakers.

The examples in Section 2 all pertained to *second person* dual and plural

in the present tense paradigm. Consider now first and third person.

(13) *tubdâδ* ‘to know; to feel’

	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

We see in (13) that all of 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, Speaker A and B make a dual/plural distinction in first and third persons 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 *kuálástiδ* ‘to fish’ in the past tense.

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

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

We see in (14) that the distinction between second person dual and plural is kept in the past tense. What we saw in section 2 is not the only dual/plural merger we find ever in the Inari Sami verb paradigms. There are other mergers in paradigms of specific stems that are due to morpho-phonological changes. However, although there are other sporadic mergers, there is no general tendency to lose the dual/plural distinction.

Only one of my informants, Speaker A, does not always keep a strict distinction between the two, although she does *recognize* the difference and knows all the relevant forms.<sup>5</sup> She sometimes uses the plural forms in dual contexts. Sentences (15-17) are examples of her speech.

(15) *Miij kyevtis tánsšâp miij usteváin.*  
 we.PL two dance.1.PL our.PL friend.COMITATIVE  
 ‘The two of us dance with our friend.’

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

(17) *Pärni já almai tobdeh miij.*  
 child and man know.3.PL 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. Note that Speaker A’s ‘sloppiness’ cannot be appealed to to explain the *-vettee/-vetteδ* merger of Section 2. Recall that Speaker A had 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 cannot be used as an explanation for the fact that she has replaced the second person plural form with the dual.

In sum, we do not find evidence that the data presented in Section 2 are due to the fact that the dual/plural distinction in Inari Sami is unstable or disappearing.<sup>6</sup>

### 3.2 Phonetic Salience

Following scholars like Mark Hale (1997) and John Ohala (1981), I take it to be important to consider language acquisition to account for language change. The current proposal will be based on the assumption that the changes we see in Section 2 are 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.<sup>7</sup> The end result is two grammars that are not identical to each other, nor are they identical to the input grammar. In the table 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>-vetteδ</i>
2nd plural	<i>-vetteδ</i>	<i>-vettee</i>	<i>-vetteδ</i>

An  $[\delta]$  in final unstressed position is not phonetically salient and is thus difficult to perceive in the flow of normal speech. 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  $[\delta]$  in the ending *-vetteδ*, 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  $[\delta]$ , she assumed it was a dialectal variant of the ending without  $[\delta]$ .

The change of Speaker B is less straightforward. If final unstressed  $[\delta]$  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  $[\delta]$  is difficult to perceive. Speaker B learns the ending *-vetteδ* for second person plural, and then he hears *-vettee* for second person dual. Knowing that final  $[\delta]$  is difficult to perceive, he hypercorrects and posits a sound that

is not there: he assumes that the speaker has said *-vetteδ* 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

In this paper, I have presented data on Inari Sami verb morphology which reveal variation between speakers. Two of the informants differ from the norm, but they do not differ in the same way. The analysis 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.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Recently there have been attempts to establish a normative form of the language. Inari Sami has been taught in several schools in the Lake Inari region and textbooks have been created for that purpose.

<sup>2</sup>In the dictionaries, the second person plural pronoun is *tij*, not *tijj*. In the speech of the informants that I refer to in this paper, it is *tijj*.

<sup>3</sup>Note that Speaker A has not lost final  $[\delta]$  everywhere. In all the infinitive forms cited in this paper, for example, she still has the  $[\delta]$  sound.

<sup>4</sup>The Inari Sami letter *-â-* symbolizes a central, mid or low, unrounded vowel. The letter *á* is a low, back, unrounded vowel.

<sup>5</sup>Second person in the present tense paradigm is obviously an exception to this, since Speaker A does not recognize the dual/plural distinction there(Section 2).

<sup>6</sup>In this section, I have based my argumentation solely on specific data from my informants. It should also be noted that ‘weakening of a distinction’ is an incoherent notion. Either a grammar has a distinction, or it does not.

<sup>7</sup>Terms like ‘misanalyze’ have a negative connotation. The child is of course just *analyzing* the input. ‘Misanalyze’ here simply means posit a grammar different from the parents’ grammar.

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