

Anders Holmberg
University of Newcastle
UMD Colloquium
10/25/04

The empty generic subject pronoun in Finnish

Finnish doesn't have an overt generic pronoun corresponding to English *one*, French *on*, Italian *si*, etc. The Finnish counterpart to English, French, etc. constructions with a generic pronominal subject have no overt indication of a subject at all.

- (1) Tässä istuu mukavasti.
here sits comfortably
'One sits comfortably here.'

Scholars who have investigated or commented on the construction have assumed that it contains a syntactically active generic subject pronoun, and have presented arguments to that effect. However, to date there is no comprehensive account of the syntactic properties of this putative null pronoun. One striking property that it has is that, unlike other null subjects, it doesn't satisfy the EPP. Therefore either an expletive subject has to be inserted, or another category such as a locative or an object has to move to the 'EPP-position' preceding the finite verb.

In the present paper I will try to determine in as much detail as possible the syntactic properties of the Finnish generic pronoun: Where does the Finnish generic subject construction fit in the typology of impersonal constructions? What features does the empty generic pronoun have? Does it receive case? Does it trigger agreement? Why does it not satisfy the EPP? Where in the structure does it reside? It will be shown that the pronoun receives case, triggers agreement, and generally does almost everything overt subjects do, except that lacking a lexical form altogether it is invisible for the EPP, and therefore cannot move, but remains in its first-merged position.

The phenomenon has consequences for the theory of EPP: It only recognizes spelled-out categories. It also has consequences for pro-drop: It must be the case that regular pro-dropped subjects are spelled out and then deleted, rather than being inherently empty little pro.