

**From pronoun to zero marking:  
variation in the expression of the 1st person subject in South Estonian Seto**

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The expression of subject pronouns is a phenomenon which is known to vary significantly from one language to another with regard to both the available grammatical means for expressing the pronominal subjects (e.g., independent pronouns, affixes, clitics) and the obligatory *vs.* optional use of these means (Siewierska 2004, Dryer 2013).

In our paper, we set our focus on the Seto language – a South Estonian variety, which belongs to the Finno-Ugric language family –, and investigate the variation in the expression of 1st person singular subject pronouns in both affirmative and negative clauses. Estonian is similar to other Finno-Ugric languages in that it enables the expression of person both as independent pronouns as well as verbal suffixes, which are developed from pronouns (Janhunen 1982). However, Seto as a South Estonian variety makes almost no use of the verbal suffixes, and can simultaneously also drop the pronoun, which makes solving the person reference fully context-dependent.

We compare older Seto data in the Corpus of Estonian Dialects (CED), recorded in the 1960s-1970s, to newer Seto data from the past decade in order to 1) detect potential changes in the usage frequency of the overt 1SG subject pronoun, and 2) assess the effect and relative importance of different morphosyntactic, semantic, and cognitive/discourse-related factors characterizing the situational and contextual settings of the corpus usage events where reference to the 1st person is made and therefore, potentially affecting the choice between overt and covert pronoun use.

In contemporary spoken Estonian, pronouns occur with 82% of 1st person verb forms (Duvallon & Chalvin 2004), while there is remarkable variation in that regard in Estonian dialects (Lindström et al. 2009). Our earlier studies based on the CED data have shown that the use of explicit pronoun with the 1st person verb form can range from 24% to 71% with Seto having the lowest percentage. We hypothesize that the use of the 1st person pronoun has increased over time due to the rapid population decline in the Seto-speaking community and the growing influence of Estonian and Russian.

There is a multitude of factors whose individual and complex collective effects have been observed on the choice of subject pronoun expression in studies about Estonian, Finnish, and Karelian, for example (Lindström et al. 2009, Helasvuo 2014, Helasvuo & Kyröläinen 2016, Väänänen 2016, Uusitupa 2021). In this paper, we employ mixed-effects logistic regression analysis for assessing the potential effect of important factors from previous research on pronominal subject expression, such as tense, polarity, verb semantics, form, and distance of the previous reference to the 1SG, etc. We expect that the factors linked to cognitive processing of the sequential structure of the conversation emerge from the analysis as the strongest co-determinants of subject pronoun use in Seto. Distance from the previous reference to the 1st person, in particular, is expected to influence the outcome because contextual clues become more uncertain the more time has passed from the last explicit reference.

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