

Between us and them: Interpreting plural person forms in context

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Finnish has a well-entrenched and functionally multifaceted inflectional impersonal construction, usually called passive, which also covers the essential functions that third person plural (3PL) impersonals have in many languages. At the same time, 3PL forms also have impersonal or semi-impersonal uses in colloquial Finnish (Posio and Vilkuna 2013, Forsberg and Vilkuna in progress). As 3PL impersonals evoke speaker-exclusive readings, their use in Finnish appears to be motivated by the increasing inclusive readings of the impersonal passive, which has during relative recent history developed into a regular first person plural (1PL) form. Thus 3PL impersonals are predicted to be favoured in dialects where this development is most advanced. My talk is about the methodological issues that arise when spoken language data are analysed with this dialectological hypothesis in mind and the analyst must deal with situations such as shifts from uncontroversial 1PL to a clear impersonal and specific group referents emerging contextually rather than being explicitly introduced.