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The adjective attributes in Saami – form and agreement

My presentation concerns the adjective system of the Saami languages. The focus of this presentation is in the rich and complex attribute form system that is unique compared to other Finno-Ugric languages. I will compare the Saami system with the features of adjective categories in other Finno-Ugric languages. Even if this issue has been under discussion for many times, it is still quite uncertain, why and how the Saami system has developed to its current form. I will also consider the features of the adjective *buorre* ‘good’ that in attribute position acts differently from other adjectives in Saami.

Typical for adjective categories in Finno-Ugric languages is, that formally they do not differ much from substantives. Some adjectives can also be used as substantives, e. g. in Udmurt *kežyt* ‘cold; coldness, frost’ (Bartens 2000: 130). In Saami the adjective category is quite clear compared to substantives, but like in other Finno-Ugric languages, also in Saami it is possible to use an adjective as substantive, for example *nuorra* ‘young’: *Nuorat leat skuvllas*. ‘The young are at school’.

Syntactically adjectives in Finno-Ugric languages occur in attribute and predicative position. In attribute position there is usually no agreement between the adjective and its head word. In Finnic languages there is agreement, and also in Saami there is partial agreement if the attribute is a cardinal number or a demonstrative or interrogative pronoun. Of adjectives the word *buorre* ‘good’ has also partial agreement, and also *bahá* ‘bad’ if it is in connection with *buorre*. (Collinder 1960: 249.)

Usually in Finno-Ugric languages the attribute form of an adjective is the same as the basic form. In Saami, however, the attribute form is usually very different from the predicative form, and the system of attribute forms is rich and complex. For example: *ruoksat* ‘red

sg.nom.’ *rukkses* ‘red attr.’ The system of attribute forms is very rich and complex, and this is quite unique system in Finno-Ugric languages.

Many of the attribute forms are formed with suffix *-s*, e. g. *čáhppat* ‘black’, attr. *čáhppes*. Konrad Nielsen has suggested that this suffix could have developed from genitive forms with possessive suffix of the 3rd person singular (Nielsen 1933: 304), but Mikko Korhonen has seen this suggestion unlikely (1981: 246). Pekka Sammallahti assumes that this *-s* would originally be Finno-Volgaic lative suffix (1998: 71). This seems to be a regular assumption for many suffixes in Finno-Ugric languages, and it should be well explained why this attribute suffix would have developed from the lative suffix *-s*.

The examples of this presentation are mostly from Northern Saami but the main features of the system are common to all Saami languages. I will concentrate on the earlier studies of this rich and complex attribute forms system of Saami, and also make notions of adjectives that have an agreement with their head words in attribute position, such as *buorre* < **para-* (Fi. *parempi* ‘better’, *paras* ‘the best’, MdE *paro*, MdM *para* ‘good’). This **para* is quite a special adjective because it agrees with its head word in attribute position also in other Finno-Ugric languages than Saami, for example in Mordvin, where it can agree in numerus: *paro tejteř* ‘a good girl’, *part tejteřt* ‘good girls’ (Collinder 1960: 249, Bartens 1999: 108). Since the descendants of the old adjective **para* have exceptional agreement with their head words also in other Finno-Ugric languages, the original position should be reconsidered: Was this **para* adjective at all? Could it have more in common with some other category, e. g. numerals? These are the questions I’d like to open in my presentation.

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