

This paper discusses examples of phonemic and phonetic variation attested in Enets, a highly endangered Uralic language of Northern Siberia with two dialects, Forest (FE) and Tundra (TE). This variation is worth describing for three reasons. First of all, it is a part of documenting phonology of this disappearing language. Second, it is extremely frequent and widespread, including most words of the lexicon, but at the same time it does not visibly correlate with any social parameters, so this is one more case study in the vein of the sociolinguistic agenda set by Dorian (2001; 2010). Third, the Enets variation presents a challenge for consistent transcription, let alone an orthography design. Crucially, this last reason is the driving force for this research in the first place, as “[c]reating a phonemic orthography implies at least a basic phonological analysis preceding its design” (Jany 2010:234) and “faulty phonological analyses give rise to faulty orthographies” (Rehg 2004:506). Being neither a phonetician, nor a phonologist, I had initially aimed only for a basic description of sound patterns for the sake of an orthography; however, it quickly became evident that the puzzle of variation in Enets was not to be taken lightly, and more specific research was conducted.

This study is based mainly on data collected during a documentation project on Enets in 2008–2011 and in additional fieldtrips in 2015–2016: elicited wordlists and a collection of annotated modern and legacy texts (ca. 25 hrs for FE, ca. 7 hrs for TE). Examples of Enets sound variation to be analyzed in this paper are divided into three types depending on the phonetic analysis of the variation and its relationship to the lexicon. First, I will discuss phonemic variation of vowels /e/ ~ /i/, /ɔ/ ~ /u/, and /ɔ/ ~ /a/: this variation affects only certain Enets words and is a type of variability that belongs to the lexicon. Second, I will describe allophony observed in non-first syllables for vowel phonemes /e/, on the one hand, and /ɔ/, on the other hand: it results in partial neutralization of /e/ and /i/, or /ɔ/ and /u/, respectively. This case is different from the first one in that the variability here belongs to phonetics, though affecting only a part of the lexicon. Finally, I will present data for word-final vowel omission, belonging to the phonetic domain only. All data are presented with accompanying sound files and wave forms/spectrograms, where necessary.

Besides, I suggest possible driving forces of the unusually high level of variation. The first of them the sociolinguistic setting – a small, socially unstratified, homogeneous community with no standard language, and the second is the existence of a similar variation in Russian, i.e., an opposition between two types of syllables (stressed vs. unstressed in Russian and first vs. non-first in Enets) and merger of some vowels in the weaker type of syllables that could also have contributed to the stability of the observed phonological patterns, given that Russian is the dominant language of all modern Enets speakers. Finally, I aim to propose an adequate way of representing the variation in community materials and the digital corpus, based on the principle of underspecification generally useful for internally diverse speech varieties.

The Enets case thus contributes to the typology of possible sound systems of the worlds’ languages and gives an example of its treatment within a documentation and conservation effort.

Examples

Examples of phonemic variation include /e/ ~ /i/ and /ɔ/ ~ /u/ attested in the first syllable only and /ɔ/ ~ /a/ attested both in the first and the second syllables. For the first, cf. FE /nej/ ~ /niʃ/ [nej], [niʃ] ‘to stand (/ne-ʃ/ ~ /ni-ʃ/ stand-CVB)’, FE, TE /nexuʔ/ ~ /nixuʔ/ [nexuʔ], [nixuʔ] ‘three’, TE /edo/ ~ /ido/ [edo], [ido] ‘horn’, etc., while /e/ vs. /i/ otherwise represent a phonological contrast, see minimal pairs FE /jeze/ ‘shoulder blade’ vs. /ʃize/ ‘two’, FE /dieri/ ‘day’ vs. /dʲiri/ ‘moon, month’, TE /ese/ ‘father’ vs. /ise/ ‘grandfather’, TE /pe/ ‘wood’ vs. /pi/ ‘night’, etc. Likewise, FE, TE [koba], [kɔba], [kuba] ‘skin, fur’, FE, TE [koʔ], [kɔʔ], [kuʔ] ‘find’, TE [moga], [mɔga], [muga] ‘tree, forest’, FE [oorʔ], [ɔrʔ], [uurʔ] ‘eat!’ (/uu oorʔ/ ‘you eat! (eat-IMP.2SG.S)’), etc., as contrasted to the existing minimal pairs FE /tɔ/ ‘wing’ vs. /tu/ ‘fire’, /pɔ/ ‘year’ vs. /pu/ ‘stone’, FE /ɔma/ ‘he ate it up’ (eat_up.3SG) vs. /uma/ ‘mommy’ (used as a vocative only), TE /kɔɔ/ ‘tundra, ridge’ vs. /kuu/ ‘ear’. For the second, cf. FE /bɔduj/ ~ /baduj/ [bɔduj], [baduj] ‘tundra (adjective)’, FE /mɔlie/ ~ /malie/ [mɔlie], [malie] ‘already’, TE /mɔle/ ~ /male/ [mɔle], [male] ‘already’, FE /dʲɔxɔ/ ~ /dʲɔxa/ [dʲɔxɔ], [dʲɔxa] ‘river’, etc., contrasted to such minimal pairs as FE /dʲɔgo/ ‘trap’ vs. /dʲago/ ‘there is no (there_is_no.3SG.S)’, FE /kɔza/ ‘nail’ vs. /kaza/ ‘granny’, FE /mɔna/ ‘egg’ vs. /mana/ ‘he said (say.3SG.S)’, etc.

Examples of allophony in non-first syllables are FE, TE /kare/ [kari], [kariɛ] ‘fish’, FE, TE /tʃike/ [tʃiki], [tʃikie] ‘this’, FE, TE /bine/ [biɛne], [biɛni] ‘rope’, etc., FE, TE [kɔdɔ], [kɔdo], [kɔdu] ‘sledge’, FE [biakɔʔ], [biakujʔ] ‘my neck (neck-NOM.SG.1SG)’, FE [piɛxɔn], [piɛxon], [piɛxun] ‘outside (outer_space-LOC.SG)’, etc., though this allophony is lexically restricted, cf. FE, TE /ɔzima/ [ɔzima] (no [ɔzema] attested) ‘he appeared (appear.3SG.S)’, FE /kuzi/ [kuzi] (no [kuze] attested) ‘spoon’, TE /kuuzi/ [kuuzi] (no TE [kuuze] attested) ‘spoon’, etc. and FE, TE [mɔtuʔ] (no [mɔtoʔ] or [mɔtɔʔ] attested) ‘six’, FE, TE [kɔru] (no [kɔro] or [kɔrɔ] attested) ‘knife’, FE, TE [nexuʔ] (no [nexoʔ] or [nexɔʔ] attested) ‘three’.

Examples for word-final vowel omission include in affixes FE /kɔduraʃ/ ~ /kɔduraʃi/ [kɔduraʃ] >>> [kɔduraʃi] ‘to try’ (/kɔdura-ʃi/ ‘try-CVB’), FE /dʲieeb/ ~ /dʲieebi/ [dʲieebi] >>> [dʲieebi] ‘let it ache’ (/dʲie-ebi/ ‘ache-3SG.S.IMP), TE /niɔ dʲɔzito/ [dʲɔzit], [dʲɔzito] ‘beat the child!’ (/niɔ dʲɔzi-to/ ‘child beat-2SG.S.Osg.IMP), TE /tɔdʲi niɔdo kɔltado/ [niɔdo], [niɔdɔ], [niɔd], [kɔltad], [kɔltadɔ] ‘you have washed your child’ (/tɔdʲi niɔ-do kɔlta-do/ ‘you child-OBL.SG.2SG wash-2SG.S’), etc. or in bare lexemes FE, TE /kɔdo/ [kɔdo], [kɔd], [kɔt] ‘sledge’, FE, TE /baru/ [baru], [bar] ‘edge’, FE /kamozo/ [kamozo], [kamoz] ‘house’, FE /tʃuku/ [tʃuku], [tʃuk] ‘all’, TE /nenogo/ [nenog], [nenog] ‘mosquito’, etc.

References

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