

Forest Nenets — a language of variations

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Phonological and morphological variation in Forest Nenets expectedly involves a number of dialect differences, for instance, western dialects differ from eastern dialects in exhibiting denasalization (W *mäl̥taka* vs E *mäl̥taŋka* ‘cloudberry’), analogical forms of so-called alternation stems (W *ŋamtyuŋa* vs E *ŋimti* ‘[s]he sits’), and generalization of secondary vowel stems in the nominative singulars of consonant stem nouns (W *myat*^o vs E *myäq* ‘tent’). Eastern dialects, in turn, appear more innovative or at least more advanced in the processes of simplification of consonant clusters (E *käl^ota-* vs W *käl^opta-* ‘wash [objects]’) and phonemization of short mid vowels (E *syöt^opya* vs W *syüt^opya* ‘giant’), although both of these changes seem to keep spreading both geographically and across generations. Indeed, older speakers in the east have more consonant clusters and fewer short mid vowels (W & older E *jüt̥k^onu* vs younger E *jöt^onu* ‘morning’). By contrast, secondary vowel stems as explained above appear in the speech of some younger representatives of eastern dialects, and they may also employ analogical forms of alternation stems (yielding variations along the line W & younger E vs older E).

More conspicuous than geographic and generational differences are the variants found in the 1st person singular and in the 3rd person singular and plural subjective verb-forms, exemplified by 1sg *jtyiŋat^o* ~ *jtyem^oq* ‘I live’, and 3sg *jtyiŋa* ~ *jtye^o* ‘(s)he lives’ or 3pl *jtyiŋaq* ~ *jtye^oq* ‘they live’ that not only occur very frequently but seem to exhibit free variation across the entire language community. Combined with dialect differences, triplets such as 3sg *ŋimti* ~ *ŋamtyuŋa* ~ *ŋamtyo^o* ‘(s)he sits’ are created. Although less prone to free variation, variants such as *tityutya* ~ *tityutŋa* ‘it (e.g., a reindeer) is jumpy’ are both accepted by some speakers as well. Further discussed will be pairs of regular and analogical variants of trisyllabic consonant-stem nouns, e.g. *jtyepsy^o* ~ *jtyipsyāŋ* ‘livelihood’. At the phonological level, instances of initial *x* ~ *s* (*xaqkatā-* ~ *saqkatā-* ‘swing’) and internal *l* ~ *t* (*jolsy^o* ~ *jotsy^o* ‘time’) variations also warrant attention.

Moreover, even for a language that has only been cultivated in written form for a short period of time, Forest Nenets orthography exhibits rampant instability. Not only are there notable differences in the ways that published authors (Вожакова, Вэлла, Логаны, Приходько, Турутина) write their language but each of the printed schoolbooks (a primer, a reader, and two editions of a school dictionary) shows divergent spellings despite the fact that the same interconnected Forest Nenets specialists (Докучаева, Пяк née Вэлло) were involved in the preparation of all of them. Such diverse orthographic attestations may be based on genuine variation in spoken language or, more commonly, on different implementations of phonological principles.

Selected publications in Forest Nenets

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