Kildin Saami voiceless sonorants

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Kildin Saami is described as a language with an exceptionally large consonant inventory, 113 segments according to the PHOIBLE database (Moran & McCloy 2019). This number is reached due to the opposition between palatalised vs. plain consonants and the contrast in quantity. Such an analysis was proposed by Kert (1971) and then reproduced with some modifications by Rießler (2022). The Kildin Saami consonantal system is remarkable not only for its size, but also for the presence of cross-linguistically rare elements, such as the voiceless sonorants *l̥*, *r̥*, *m̥*, *n̥*, *j̥*. All of these, except *j̥*, can be palatalised, and both plain and palatalised counterparts are claimed to come in long or short varieties. Voiceless sonorants are rare not only cross-linguistically but also in Kildin Saami itself, their functional load is weak, and the evidence in favour of their phonological status is questionable.

In the present talk, we reapproach the synchronic phonological status of Kildin Saami voiceless sonorants, arguing that they are to be treated as clusters with underlying /h/, i.e. /rh/ pro /r̥/ etc. We will also present some acoustic data which could support this solution. Finally, we will show that Kildin Saami voiceless sonorants originate historically from clusters with /h/.

The status of /h/ is of crucial meaning for the discussion of the voiceless sonorants. /h/ is treated as a part of "preaspirated stops" by Rießler (2022), however, the fact that the speakers divide the "preaspiration" and the stop by a syllable border in intervocalic contexts, e.g, *naːh.pa* 'into a cup', clearly indicates that one is dealing here with a biphonemic cluster. /h/ has several (morpho)phonological restrictions, one of which is that it only occurs in strong grades, cf. the alternation: *naːhpʲ* 'a cup' vs. *naːpʲesʲtʲ* 'in a cup'. Similarly, voiceless sonorants are restricted to strong grades: *aːj̥jt* 'a barn' vs. *aːjtesʲtʲ* 'in a barn'[1]. Voiceless sonorants mostly occur before voiceless stops, as does /h/. These facts allow the interpretation of voiceless sonorants as underlying clusters: /aːjjht/ vs. /aːjtesʲtʲ/ 'in a barn'.

[1]The orthography, which represents <ā йтэсьт ~ ā jтэсьт> instead of <*айтэсьт> even in the weak grade, is misleading.

Phonetically, although the Kildin Saami voiceless rhotics and palatal approximants are entirely voiceless, the voiceless nasals and laterals are only partially devoiced. They consist of a voiced onset followed by a voiceless phase, and the acoustic analysis reveals variation in the spectra of the voiceless laterals concerning the proportion of the voiced and voiceless parts. That is, some types of Kildin Saami voiceless sonorants are cluster-like not only phonologically but also acoustically.

Historically, the Kildin Saami voiceless sonorants originate from the Proto-Saami plain sonorants in the position before geminated stops and affricates, which generally yield "preaspirated" stops and affricates in the strong grade: KSaa. *je:r ʲr ʲtʲ* 'side' < PSaa. **earttē* , cf. KSaa. *tɨhkʲ* 'louse' < PSaa. **tikkē*. This pattern is replicated by the adaptation of the borrowings. Russian stem-final non-geminated voiceless consonants behave as geminates in this regard, yielding "preaspirated" stops: KSaa. *pɒʰp* 'priest' < Rus. *pop* 'priest'. A sonorant followed by a voiceless stop or an affricate in a word-final cluster is voiceless: KSaa. *kueɻʲl̥ʲʦʲ* 'ring', < Rus. *kol'co* 'ring'. Thus, in Russian loanwords /h/ + stop clusters and voiceless sonorants also behave similarly.

In conclusion, we propose that, despite there being minimal pairs demonstrating contrast between voiced and voiceless sonorants in Kildin Saami, the latter can be interpreted as biphonemic sequences, namely, clusters of the type sonorant + /h/. Kildin Saami /h/, in turn, is to be viewed as a separate phoneme rather than a feature.

References

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