

B.10: Marginal phonemes

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In many – if not all – Uralic languages, one can find consonants and/or vowels whose phonemic status can be debated, or at least ones that rarely distinguish word forms since they only occur in a very restricted set of phonological environments.

Some of these segments can be identified as *xenophones*, as their phonemic value can be supposed only in foreign words. Examples include Votic /i/ (Ariste 1968: 1, Lauerma 1993: 53), Hungarian /a/ (Nádasdy–Siptár 1989: 11–13; Keresztes 1993: 49) or Finnish /b/, /d/, /g/, /f/, /ʃ/ and /z/ (Hakulinen et al. 2004: §6). Phonemes occurring exclusively in foreign words might behave in very different ways across languages: although /f/ does not occur in native words in most of the Uralic languages, its pronunciation [f] does not cause any difficulty for speakers of Finnish or Udmurt, while it is often substituted with [p] by the speakers of Mansi or Khanty.

Another argument for the phonemic status of marginal phonemes can be their occurrence in onomatopoeic words. Erzya [i̯] is an allomorph of /i/ after non-palatalized alveolar consonants, but /i/ also occurs in other positions in Russian words and some onomatopoeic stems (Rueter 2010: 16, 59–61). Also in Erzya, the bilabial tremulant /b/ only occurs in onomatopoeic animal calls and motherese words like /buav/ ‘outside (lative)’

(Rueter 2010: 61). Similarly, Hungarian /p̪/ is used only in onomatopoeic interjections like /p̪u(:)j/ ‘yuck’ and words derived from them like /p̪u(:)jol/ ‘to boo’: and [p̪] can be always substituted by [f].

Many marginal phonemes are not restricted to foreign or onomatopoeic words, but are restricted phonologically. Livonian /ɣ/ and /ɣ:/ only occur in initial syllables following word-initial labial consonants (Viitso 2008: 311). In Moksha, the vowels /a/ and /æ/ are considered to be distinct phonemes, but in non-initial syllables, /æ/ only occurs following palatalised consonants, and even then only word-finally or followed by either another palatalized consonant or a sibilant: consequently, it alters with /a/ in paradigms (Bartens 1999: 30): in any case, it is very difficult to find minimal pairs with /a/ and /æ/ in the literature (/kali/ ‘willow’ and /kæli/ ‘tongue, language’). In Udmurt, /u̯/ only occurs in the initial syllables of about 30 words, always following a word-initial /k/ and before /a/ (in one exception, before /i/: /kū ip/ ‘three’), although in some dialects, /u̯/ occurs word-initially before /a/ (Kel’makov 1998: 83–86). In Nganasan, /u̯ a/ occurs almost exclusively following /h/ (Fejes 2021: 243–249).

In some other cases, there are no phonetic-phonemic restrictions at all. In Hungarian, /v:/ and /ɛ:/ occur as the name of the letters <a> and <e>, respectively, and also in acronyms (Nádasdy–Siptár 1989: 13–14, Keresztes 1993: 49–51), but not elsewhere. In Standard Erzya, [ŋ] regularly occurs in the coda before velar consonants [k] and [g]; however, there is a single dialect word, /ŋot/ ‘so (you see)’, with an [ŋ] in the onset (contrasted to /not/ ‘note’) (Rueter 2010: 58–59). In the Beserman dialect of Udmurt, /i̯/ is attested in 17 words, some of them native (Idrisov 2012).

The occurrence of marginal morphemes can be restricted by morphology. E.g. Finnish /ʔ/ only occurs in a morpheme-final position, and it is not analysed as a phoneme e.g. by Hakulinen et al. (2004: §3, §34): in most cases, it is assimilated by a following consonant. Sometimes morphophonology suggests that we should suppose more underlying phonemes than surface forms indicate. In Standard Komi (both Zyryan and Permyak), morpheme-final [v] (in the coda) usually alternates with [ʃ] (in the onset), but there are also morphemes with non-alternating final [v]s and [ʃ]s. A possible analysis for the three different behaviours is a supposition of three different phonemes which are realised in three different ways but with overlapping results.

In some cases, the phonemic status in general is undoubted, but it is questionable whether the given phoneme occurs in a given position. In Vakh Khanty, /o/, /ø/, /õ/ and /ö/ are clearly distinct phonemes in initial syllables, but they do not occur in non-initial syllables except for the ablative [-oŷ] and [-øŷ] and in the first person plural suffix ending [-õŷ] : [-ö ŷ], both alternating due to vowel harmony (Tereškin 1961: 9-12).

Finally, there are cases when the phonemic status of a sound is uncertain because there are no sufficient data. In Kamas, the existence of a phoneme /ɛ/ or /æ/, distinct from /e/, is not straightforward (Klumpp 2016: 40).

Any papers discussing marginal phonemes, arguing for or against any of them, discussing them from either a synchronic or a historical point of view, empirically or theoretically, in a particular dialect or language or cross-linguistically (among Uralic languages or also outside of them) are welcome. The language of the workshop is English.

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