

Does Even have ATR? – Testing phonological hypotheses in an endangered language

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Even is an endangered Tungusic language described as having a robust system of vowel harmony. In recent decades a [+/- ATR] distinction dividing vowels into two harmonic sets was reported as a major feature of the Tungusic vowel systems. According to Ard (1980), among the Tungusic languages this feature is most salient in Even. However, this claim relies mainly on the description of the literary dialect of the Ola settlement by Novikova (1960), who had suggested pharyngealization as the major distinctive feature in Even vowel harmony. This she illustrated with X-ray still photographs of 11 vowels taken from one speaker.

Ard proposed that the distinctive feature of the two vowel sets is triggered by the retraction of the tongue root ([-ATR]) instead of being due to pharyngealization, and consequently interpreted the data as evidence for an ATR-distinction. This feature had previously been described only for languages of Western Africa (e.g. Akan, Yoruba, Igbo, cf. Ladefoged & Maddieson 1996) or Mon-Khmer languages (cf. Gregerson 1976), but Ard's hypothesis was accepted by a number of authors (cf. Li 1996, Vaux 2009) working on languages of Northeast Asia. However, no further acoustic or articulatory data were presented for Even that would justify such a claim. The only studies on a possible ATR-distinction in Tungusic languages were conducted by Svantesson (1985) on data from Solon and recently by Lulich & Whaley (ms.) on Oroqen. Both languages are Evenki varieties spoken in China belonging to the same branch of the Tungusic family as Even.

The data from Even that will be presented in this talk were recorded in the Bystraja District, Kamchatka and the village of Sebjan-Küöl, Yakutia (the most Eastern and Western edges of Even speaking area). While these Even dialects show many differences in their sound systems, presumably due to geographical distance leading to a lack of communication between speakers of different dialects and due to different language contact situations, neither of them shows a 'pharyngealization' distinction in their vowels, and they do not fit the pattern described for the Ola dialect.

In this talk we will discuss the acoustic differences of the two harmonic vowel sets found in the two Even dialects. We will consider possible acoustic correlates of [+/-ATR] and show how the acoustic data from these dialects correspond to phoneme systems with a clear ATR-distinction. Furthermore, we would like to demonstrate the problems that usually arise in situations like that of Even, where a generalizing hypothesis is applied to the very heterogeneous condition of an endangered language with only a limited set of speakers, but a variety of dialects and language contact settings. Therefore we will discuss the available practical solutions and their implications for the description of an individual language.

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