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Vowel Harmony in Two Even Dialects: Production and Perception

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Summary

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The topic of this dissertation is the analysis of vowel systems in two dialects of Even, an endangered Northern Tungusic language spoken in Eastern Siberia. Included in the dissertation are analyses of both acoustic and perception data. The data were collected during fieldwork in the Bystraia district of Central Kamchatka and in the village of Sebian-Küöl in Yakutia. The Bystraia and Sebian dialects are spoken on the periphery of the Even-speaking area separated by almost two thousand kilometers and are undergoing contact influence from neighboring languages. The dialects under examination exhibit some common tendencies in the development of vowel mergers, but at the same time there are salient differences with respect to the role of consonants in vowel harmony.

Even is known as a Tungusic language with a robust system of vowel harmony. The central question of my dissertation is the number of vowel oppositions and the nature of the feature underlying the opposition between harmonic sets. In previous research, this feature was analyzed as pharyngealization, and, later, as [±ATR]. The acoustic data of Bystraia and Sebian Even do not provide evidence for any of these analyses. The datashow a consistent pattern for only one acoustic parameter, namely F1, whichcan be phonologically interpreted as a feature [±height].Thus, the distinction between the harmonic vowel sets is relative height (with vowels previously analyzed as pharyngealized or [-ATR] being the lower ones). There is only one exception to this pattern: in the acoustic data of Sebian dialect I observe a clear merger of the high front vowels of different sets into a single phoneme /i/.

The acoustic study is supplemented by perceptual data. The results of the perception experiments, which were based on minimal or quasi-minimal pairs, show that in both dialects stimuli containing high vowels are recognized with a low success rate, whereas the presence of /e/ and /a/ in the suffix ofa word favors correct recognition. These resultssuggest that perceptually there is no harmonic opposition for high vowels, i.e.,the harmonic pairs of high vowelshave merged. Moreover, in the dialect of the Bystraia district certain consonants function as perceptual cues for the harmonic set of a word: words containing liquids or velar/uvular voiceless stops were recognized considerably better than words containing other consonants. In other words, the Bystraia Even harmony system, which was previously based on vowels, is being transferred to the consonant opposition.

At first glance, the results of the perception experiments seem to contradict the results of the acoustic study, which show a consistent difference for most vowel pairs. However, this apparent contradiction can be explained if one assumes a re-structuring of

the vowel systems via near-mergers. Thus, I propose to describe the high vowels in the Bystraia dialect and the high back u-vowels in the Sebian dialect in terms of near-mergers. I also show that there is some inter-speaker variation between near-mergers and complete mergers in the data of both dialects.