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PHONEME FREQUENCY OF OCCURRENCE IN EVENKI: A PILOT STUDY

Abstract

The current paper aimed at studying the 2 types of frequency of occurrence of phoneme groups and in some phoneme pairs – in the Evenki phonological system and speech. The results of the analysis of speech samples obtained from 4 Evenki subjects showed that there are objective grounds to consider this language as highly vocalic. These are notably higher frequencies of occurrence of vocalic sounds (vowels + sonorants) compared to obstruents both in the system and speech. Evenki is more vocalic than English and Russian and less vocalic than Yakut as far as system frequency of occurrence. This tendency is even better expressed in speech for Evenki, English and Russian. As far as there are no data on Yakut phoneme objective frequency, this comparison is a matter of further study.

For both sonorants and obstruents, system and objective frequency showed similar tendencies: prevailing of stops over fricatives, nasals over approximants, fore-lingual consonants over ones of other loci. The difference lies mainly in the degree of prevalence. Thus, both types of frequencies were balances. However, the balance was disrupted when it came to vowels grouped by the relevant features of advancement-retraction and openness degree. There were more central vowels in speech than front and back ones though there were less of them in the system. The same concerns open vowels in spontaneous speech. There was no balance whatsoever between the 2 frequency types for long and short vowels. In speech, the latter occurred several times more often than the former (the whole group and in pairs), although in the system, there were more long vowels (6 vs 5). Despite genre differences, disproportion between male and female subjects, drastic difference in the recording period and imbalances in total duration of fairy tale and spontaneous speech, the frequencies of the phoneme groups and in the phoneme pairs turned out mostly compatible.

Keywords: system frequency, frequency in speech, obstruents, sonorants, manner of production, locus, long and short vowels.

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