

How does one borrow paradigms? Using historical sociolinguistics to reconstruct a rare process

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Given their core role in linguistic structure, verbal inflectional paradigms are among the rarest features found to be borrowed. To date, only three languages with borrowed verbal paradigms are known, all from northeastern Eurasia: the mixed language Copper Island Aleut, where the entire verbal inflection is of Russian origin (Golovko 1996, Thomason 1997); the Učur dialect of Evenki, which borrowed the assertive-presumptive paradigm from Sakha (Yakut; Myreeva 1964, Malchukov 2006); and Lamunxhin Even, which borrowed four verbal paradigms from Sakha (Pakendorf 2009, 2015, to appear; see ex. 1). The development of mixed languages such as Copper Island Aleut has been explained in different ways: 1) as a response to a need for the expression of a new social identity, with involvement of conscious linguistic manipulation (e.g. Golovko 2003), and 2) as the result of arrested language shift (Vakhtin 1998, Auer 2014). While Copper Island Aleut and Učur Evenki are most likely extinct by now, Lamunxhin Even is still viable, allowing investigations of the sociolinguistic situation that may have facilitated this rare outcome of language contact.

Lamunxhin Even is spoken by formerly nomadic hunters and reindeer breeders who were settled in the village of Sebjan-Küöl in central Yakutia in the early 1930s (Krivošapkin 2011: 6). In 2009, approximately 85% of the ~860 inhabitants of the village were registered as Evens, with the majority of the remainder being Sakha. Currently, Sakha is clearly the dominant indigenous language in the Republic Sakha (Yakutia), and Sebjan-Küöl is no exception: all speakers of Even are bilingual in Sakha, and Sakha is the language of interaction in most public settings (village administration, shops, teachers' room at the school). However, given the lack of historical data, it is not known how long this bilingualism in Sakha among speakers of Lamunxhin Even may have lasted, making it difficult to achieve insights into the process of the paradigm borrowing.

In an attempt to elucidate the social and historical factors that may have played a role in the paradigm borrowing, I conducted a sociolinguistic study in Sebjan-Küöl in 2009. This comprised both an investigation of current language attitudes as well as an attempt at obtaining insights into historical bilingualism by asking respondents about parents' and grandparents' language use (cf. Dobrushina 2013). Given that a molecular anthropological study revealed that nearly half the Lamunxhin Even paternal lineages are of Sakha origin in the absence of detectable Sakha maternal lineages (Duggan et al. 2013), one of the tested hypotheses was that the borrowed paradigms might serve as markers of a new, mixed identity. However, as I will discuss in this talk, the sociolinguistic investigation did not confirm this hypothesis, nor did it provide any indication that arrested language shift may have played a role in the paradigm borrowing. Rather, the results point towards Lamunxhin Evens having been linguistically accommodating vis-a-vis the Sakha, with bilingual interactions reaching back at least 100-120 years. Thus, it is likely that the borrowed paradigms entered Lamunxhin Even via code-switching in a community that was and is fully bilingual.

Example (bold font marks the borrowed form, and “Y” indicates Sakha elements in Even:

(1) a. Lamunkhin Necessitive (beseda_1377_IAS)

*bi emie tala hore-jekte:kp**in***

1SG also.Y there go-NEC.1SG.Y

‘I also have to go there’

b. Sakha Necessitive (RaxA_058)

*min beh-is kila:s-ka Ītik-Küöl-ge üören-**ieχte:χ-pin***

1SG five-ORD class-DAT Ytyk-Küöl-DAT study-NEC-1SG

‘I should have studied (lit. I must study) in Ytyk-Küöl in the 5th grade...’

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