
Introduction

Evenki (*Evedy turen*, lit. 'the Evenki language'; or *Iledy turen* 'human language') is one of eight Tungusic languages spoken in Siberia and the Far East of Asiatic Russia. Evenki belongs to the Northern Tungusic subgroup, the closest cognate languages being Negidal, Solon and Even (Lamut). There is also the Southern Tungusic subgroup which comprises five languages (Nanai or Gol'dy, Oroch, Uilta or Orok, Udehe and Ul'cha). Manchu (with its dialect Sibo) and Solon are the two members of the Tungus-Manchu group, which are spoken outside of Russia (in China). The time-depth of the split-up of the Tungus-Manchu parent language, as the glotto-chronological method shows, is at least 2,000 years. At that time, as the comparative data show, proto-Tungusic dialects were closer to the modern Northern Tungusic languages, that is to Evenki and Even. It is probable that Even separated from the common unit at the same time as the dialects which became Manchu and Southern Tungusic languages – that is, that it did not separate after the Northern and Southern Tungusic dialects had formed.

Before 1930 Evenki was termed the Tungus language, and the people speaking this language were called 'Tungusy'. This term was never used by the Evenkis themselves: it is believed to have Chinese origin. According to the last census (1989) there are about 29,000 Evenkis living in the vast area of Siberia. Evenki is spoken in almost all parts of Siberia: from the Ob and Enisei regions in the west to the shores of the Okhotsk Sea and the island of Sakhalin in the east, and from the regions in the vicinity of the Arctic Ocean in the north to the Amur river in the south. Several thousand Evenkis live in northern China. There are three main language variants or sets of dialects which are further subdivided into approximately fifty dialects. The first variant is spoken in the northern parts of the Krasnoyarsk and Irkutsk regions (for example the villages of Tura, Chirinda, Ekonda, Nakanno and Erbogachon). The second variant is spoken in the areas situated in the vicinity of Lake Baikal (for example the villages of Vanavara, Bajkit, and Poligus, and also some villages in Buryatia). The third variant is spoken in the Far Eastern part of Russia

(villages in the Khabarovsk and Vladivostok regions). Some 10,000 Evenkis live in different regions of the Saha-Yakutia Republic. The best preserved Evenki dialects are in the northern and in the eastern parts of Siberia. There are villages in those areas where Evenki is spoken even by children (for instance, Chirinda and Ekonda in the north, and Chumikan and Tugur in the east). In the Krasnoyarsk region there is the Evenki National District with the capital Tura situated on the banks of the Nizhn'aja (Lower) Tunguska river. This district has an area of about 770,000 square kilometres and a population of about 25,000 people. Only 2,500 of them are Evenkis. The so-called 'southern' dialect of Evenki is spoken in the southern part of the Evenki National District, for instance, in the villages of Vanavara, Chemdal'sk, Mutorai, Strelka-Chunja. The dialects spoken in these villages (and also in Bajkit and Poligus) have been considered since 1962 to be literary, in spite of the fact that they are less well preserved by comparison with the northern and the eastern dialects. In the areas where southern dialects are spoken mainly during fishing, hunting or reindeer-breeding, Evenkis under 30, as a rule, do not know their mother tongue except for a few words. It is also true that these 'southern' dialects are best described, since the best monographs on morphology (Konstantinova 1964; Lebedeva, Konstantinova and Monakhova 1979) and syntax (Kolesnikova 1966) were based on the data taken from the Poligus and Bajkit dialects.

Since Evenkis have been so widely dispersed for at least ten centuries, their dialects differ greatly, as far as phonetics and vocabulary are concerned. Grammatical phenomena are to a large extent common, though various dialects may differ, for instance, in tense and converbial paradigms. Evenkis belonging to one set of dialects understand each other without difficulty. Misunderstanding may appear between Evenkis belonging, say, to the northern and to the eastern groups of dialects. Sometimes a wife and a husband belonging to different dialects may even laugh at each other, because one word may mean different things in their dialects (for instance, *chipkan* may mean 'duck', 'sable', 'bear' or 'any animal'). The most characteristic difference in phonetics is the variation /s/ ~ /h/. For instance, words beginning with *s* in the southern and in the eastern dialects begin with *h* in the northern dialects, for example Vanavara *sulaki* 'fox' – Nakanno *hulaki* 'fox', compare also *sa:-re-n/ha:-re-n* 'he/she knows'. Words having intervocal *s* in the southern dialects have intervocal *h* in the northern and the eastern dialects, for example Poligus *bi-si-n/* Erbogachon *bi-hi-n* 'he/she is', compare also *e:sa/e:ha* 'eye', *esi/ehi* 'now'.

Lexical differences are very numerous and are well documented in Vasilevich (1958). Nowadays, Russian is spoken by almost all Evenkis. In Yakutia, Evenkis speak Yakut, and in Buryatia, Buryat. There is a large number of Russian loan-words in Evenki speech, since in almost all the areas where Evenki is spoken Russians are in the overwhelming majority.

Evenki is now taught in St Petersburg State Pedagogical University (Department of the Peoples of the Far North). After their graduation, young Evenki students teach either Russian language and literature or their mother tongue to Evenki children from 6 to 14 years of age.

Evenki has a written literature dating back to the early 1930s: folklore, novels, poetry, numerous translations from Russian and other languages, school textbooks for almost all classes, sometimes written by different authors for one level but for different dialects. There are several Evenki–Russian and Russian–Evenki dictionaries which are given in the References.

This book describes one of the southern dialects spoken in Vanavara, Mutorai and Strelka-Chunja since the author visited these areas in 1988. It has been mentioned already that these dialects are taken as a basis for the written (literary) language. A regional paper of the Evenki National District three times a week devotes one page to materials published in Evenki (fairy tales, riddles, stories, translations of official documents, etc.). It should be noted, that it is not easy even for educated Evenkis (and, of course, for children at schools) in the north and in the east to get used to quite unusual ways of coding their native language, since these ways reflect all phonetic, lexical and, what is most important, unfamiliar grammatical properties characterizing almost all the nominal and verbal categories. It would be desirable to have at least three standards for Evenki (northern, southern and eastern), and, perhaps, one more standard for the Evenkis living in Yakutia. But of course this requires much preparatory work and means.

Since 1932, the Evenki orthography has been based on the Russian. Before that time it was based on the Latin alphabet. Evenki possesses a rich system of suffixal derivation. In fact, Evenki is the richest language of the Tungus-Manchu group as far as the number of suffixal morphemes is concerned. The closest languages to Evenki are Negidal (spoken on the Amur river by about 200 people) and Solon (spoken in Inner Mongolia, China).

Undoubtedly, the Negidals and the Solons were previously Evenki tribes. Any person who knows Evenki can read Negidal texts without difficulty, since these languages share the most important grammatical features and a large part of their vocabulary. It is true, however, that Negidal has been influenced to some extent by the Southern Tungusic languages (for example Ul'cha) which are spoken in the vicinity. The Solons called themselves 'Evenki', which proves that they are formed from some southern Evenki tribe which lived to the south of Lake Baikal. Some 300 hundred years ago this tribe was taken by the Manchus to China to serve in the Manchurian army. Since then Solon has undergone considerable influence by Chinese and Manchu. There are many grammatical phenomena of common origin in the Tungusic languages (for

example, markers of main cases, some tense and mood suffixes), to say nothing of hundreds of common words. Still mutual comprehension between different languages is absolutely excluded.

REPRESENTATION OF EVENKI EXAMPLES

In the examples presented in the book, morpheme boundaries within words are marked by a hyphen; sometimes bases and suffixes are not broken down in cases when morphemic analysis is irrelevant. Affixes cited in isolation are preceded by a hyphen. Individual morphemes frequently show varying forms due to the vowel harmony and the consonants preceding the suffix. Nominals not marked in the glosses for case or number should be understood as nominative and singular. A verb stem without any suffixes cannot function as an autonomous verb form (compare a pure verb stem in Turkic languages, which may function as an imperative mood form).

Evenki

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