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Nenets

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Nenets is a subbranch of the Samoyed branch of the Uralic family comprising two closely related but distinct languages, Forest Nenets (FN) and Tundra Nenets (TN). Tundra Nenets is spoken by nearly 30 000 people across the vast tundra zone of Arctic Russia and northwestern Siberia, while Forest Nenets has perhaps 1500 speakers along the Pur, Agan, Lyamin, and Nadym river basins in northwestern Siberia. A clear majority of the speakers are proficient in Russian, and in the European part of the Tundra Nenets territory in particular, the native language is in these days rarely transmitted to younger generations. In addition to Russian, Tundra Nenets has had contacts especially with Komi and Northern Khanty, and Forest Nenets has been greatly influenced by Eastern Khanty.

Besides Nenets, the Samoyed branch includes Nganasan, Enets (Forest Enets and Tundra Enets), Yurats, Selkup (Northern Selkup, Central Selkup, and Southern Selkup), Kamas, and Mator; of these, Yurats, Kamas, and Mator are extinct, the Enets languages as well as Central Selkup and Southern Selkup are critically endangered; Nganasan is still spoken by approximately 500 people and Northern Selkup by 1500. Samoyed is the easternmost branch of the Uralic family; the other branches are Khanty, Mansi, Hungarian, Permian, Mari, Mordvin, Finnic, and Saami.

The Nenets languages are synthetic, agglutinating with some fusion and, in Forest Nenets, metaphony, morphophonologically complex, suffixing and predominantly verb-final.

The vowel system of Tundra Nenets in the first syllable includes nine vowels differing in both quality and quantity (one short vowel marked with \emptyset in phonological transcription, five basic vowels, $i e a o u$, a mixed [diphthongoid] vowel æ , and two long vowels, $\hat{i} \hat{u}$; in unstressed syllables, a schwa, ° , typically realized as extra lengthening of the preceding segment, occurs in addition to the five basic vowels. The Forest Nenets vowel system has been restructured after the Eastern Khanty model and consists of stressed syllables of six long vowels, $i e \text{ä} a o u$, and four short vowels, $\hat{i} \text{ä} \hat{a} \hat{u}$ (corresponding to $i \text{ä} a u$); in unstressed syllables, only a schwa ° and $i a u$ are possible. The stress is not contrastive but falls on nonfinal odd or pre- and postschwa syllables. A feature affecting both consonants and vowels is palatalization: the traditional formulation is that vowels have back vs. front allophones after nonpalatalized vs. palatalized consonants, but palatality (marked with y between a consonant and vowel in phonological transcription) can also be understood as a suprasegmental feature with a CV sequence under its scope. The consonant system of Tundra Nenets consists of 26 units (up to 31 in dialects); in Forest Nenets there are 24 consonants. Both systems include a velar nasal (ng) and a velar fricative (x); in Forest Nenets, vibrants have changed to fricolaterals (lh) under the Eastern Khanty influence; in Tundra Nenets, there are affricates (c) that have developed from consonant clusters still retained in Forest Nenets; both languages have a glottal stop marked with q or, in Tundra Nenets, h in case it has nasal sandhi alternants. The above figures include palatalized consonants, which in Tundra Nenets are only contrastive in the labial and dental series, while in Forest Nenets, there are palatalized velars as well. An old phonotactic peculiarity of Nenets is the lack

of initial vowels: this is now relaxed in most varieties, but in the Central dialects of Tundra Nenets the principle is still fully alive and is even reflected in recent Russian loanwords such as *ngarmiya* ‘army.’ In Tundra Nenets, there is a sandhi system affecting both the final consonant of the preceding word and the initial consonant of the following one, for instance, *nyeh xøn°* ‘woman’s sledge’ is transformed to *nyeng_køn°*, *pyiq xøn°* ‘sledge for wood’ to *pyi_køn°*, and *ngarka to* ‘big lake’ to *ngarka_do* by sandhi.

Nouns distinguish seven cases: nominative, accusative, and genitive are the grammatical cases that in their basic functions denote subject, object, and possessor; dative, locative, ablative, and prosecutive (‘through, along, by’) constitute the local cases. There are three numbers, singular, dual, and plural, but there is a gap in the nominal paradigm in that the local cases do not combine with the dual number, the respective meanings being expressed by postpositional phrases. The inflection of personal pronouns follows a distinct pattern, and their local cases are also replaced with forms of postpositions. Besides absolute declension, the nominal inflection includes possessive as well as predestinative (‘for’) forms, e.g., FN *wyiq* ‘water’: *wyiqj°* ‘my water’: *wyiqtâj°* ‘water for me.’ The postpositions are typically inflected in local cases and have possessive forms as well, e.g., FN ablative *ngîlh°tâj°* ‘from under me’ or prosecutive *pumnantung* ‘along their tracks.’ In predicative position, nouns agree with the subject employing the same personal suffixes (but not showing the other inflectional peculiarities) as intransitive verbs, e.g., TN *lúca* ‘Russian’: *lúcad°m* ‘I am a Russian.’

Verbs have numerous grammatical categories, covering person, number, tense, and mood. The number of moods is large, in Tundra Nenets up to 18, making it possible to express various levels of probability and necessity morphologically; the imperative and optative moods employ sets of personal suffixes different from other moods. Perfective vs. imperfective aspect is an inherent feature of a verb, and aspectual pairs are created through derivational morphology. The tense is expressed by two distinct systems: first, there is an opposition between unmarked basic tense and suffixally marked future and habitive tenses; second, there is unmarked aorist vs. preterite marked by a suffix that morphotactically follows the personal suffix; it is possible to combine the two tense systems, e.g., TN *xada-* ‘kill’: aorist *xadaow°* ‘I killed it (just now)’: preterite *xada°wösy°* ‘I killed it (earlier)’: future aorist *xadangkuw°* ‘I am going to kill it’: future preterite *xadangkuwösy°* ‘I was going to kill it.’ As seen from the examples, the basic aorist refers to

immediate past in case of perfective verbs such as ‘kill,’ whereas the aorist of imperfective verbs simply expresses present, e.g., *nyoda-* ‘follow’: *nyodaow°* ‘I am following it.’ A specific grammatical category in Nenets is known as conjugation: it covers the opposition between subjective forms used when the object is focused and objective forms referring to previously known or omitted objects, e.g., TN *tim xadaod°m* ‘I killed a/the reindeer (and not another animal)’ vs. *tim xadaow°* ‘I killed the reindeer (instead of doing something else to it)’; in the objective conjugation, the number of the object is expressed morphologically, e.g., *xadangax°yun°* ‘I killed them (two)’ vs. *xadeyøn°* ‘I killed them (several)’; furthermore, there are reflexive forms that either contrast with forms with a transitive meaning, e.g., *tonta-* ‘cover’: objective *tonta°da* ‘(s)he covered it’: reflexive *tontey°q* ‘it got covered,’ or constitute the only finite forms of a lexical verb, typically expressing sudden movement or change in state. The personal suffixes cannot generally be attached directly to the verbal stem, but they trigger a complex system of morphological substems.

There is a wide range of nonfinite verbal forms in Nenets, with an important function in embedded clauses (either independently or within postpositional phrases, often with switch-reference, whereby a nonfinite verb is marked differently depending on whether its subject is the same as, or differs from, that of the finite verb), as there are no conjunctions or relative pronouns. Negation is expressed by a negative auxiliary verb incorporating all categories of verbal inflection followed by a specific connegative form of a lexical verb, e.g., TN *nyix°yun° xadaq* ‘I did not kill them (two)’; since the nominal paradigm lacks a connegative, negative nominal predicates must incorporate a copula, e.g., TN *lúcad°m nyid°m ngaq* ‘I am not a Russian.’

Within the basic SOV word order of a transitive sentence, the adverbial phrases are typically placed as Time S Place/Recipient O Manner V, but any focused element can occur preverbally, and even postverbal constituents are possible in case of two morphologically or functionally similar phrases, e.g., FN *ngopk°na myatuqngaj° mâj° myaqk°naj°* ‘we (two) live together in our tent,’ where both *ngopk°na* ‘together’ and *mâj° myaqk°naj°* ‘in our tent’ are in the locative case. In imperative sentences, typically without an overt subject, the nominal object is in the nominative instead of the accusative. The personal pronouns, by contrast, employ their accusative forms even in imperative sentences, while in possessive phrases with a morphologically marked possessed noun they appear, if not omitted, in the nominative rather than in the genitive. Agreement within a

nominal phrase is possible in number when the non-singularity of the noun is more definite, and in relative clauses possessive agreement also occurs, e.g., TN *metyida wadyida* ‘note the words he uses’, cf. *meta* imperfective participle of ‘use,’ *wada* ‘word.’

Both Nenets languages are endangered, but there are major differences between localities in language use. Tundra Nenets has a literary language deriving from the 1930s used in semiregular book printing and having a limited presence in schools and the press, while Forest Nenets remained unwritten until the 1990s, when a primer and a school dictionary appeared. In the areas where the languages remain vigorous, oral literature, including tales, stories, and riddles as well as epic, lyric, and personal songs, is also flourishing (Castrén and Lehtisalo, 1940; Lehtisalo, 1947; Kupriyanova, 1965; Tereshchenko, 1990; Niemi, 1998). The traditional way of life based on reindeer husbandry or fishing (Khomich, 1995) continues to be appreciated by many Nenets as long as oil and gas excavations do not entirely destroy their lands and the authorities do not force them to relocate (Golovnev and Osherenko, 1999).

For a small indigenous language, Tundra Nenets is reasonably well studied, especially with regard to its phonology and morphology (Castrén, 1854; Tereshchenko 1947, 1956; Décsy, 1966; Janhunen, 1986; Salminen, 1997, 1998a) and lexicon (Pyrerka and Tereshchenko, 1948; Lehtisalo, 1956 [covering both Nenets languages]; Tereshchenko, 1965), while there is only one monograph devoted to the syntax of the Samoyed languages in general (Tereshchenko, 1973). This article is mainly based on Salminen (1998b) as well as more recent field studies funded by the Endangered Languages Documentation Programme. Forest Nenets has been studied much less extensively than Tundra Nenets, with a couple of basic grammatical treatments published (Verbov, 1973; Sammallahti, 1974).

See also: Russian Federation: Language Situation; Uralic Languages.

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