Samoyed languages in *The Oxford Guide to the Uralic Languages*

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The Samoyed languages, located at the eastern periphery of the Uralic language family, still remain one of this family's lesser-known subgroups. Therefore, the section on Samoyed (Chapters 34–39) provided in *The Oxford Guide to the Uralic Languages* (hereinafter abbreviated as OGUL) is a welcome contribution to work on the Samoyed subfamily, and especially the chapters on individual Samoyed languages will serve as a handy reference and an introduction to the basics of the grammar of these idioms, some of which are yet to receive even a modern monograph-length treatment. A large portion of this section of OGUL will, at least for the time being, remain one of the most accessible sources of information on Samoyed (see also, however, the section on Samoyed in Abondolo & Valijärvi 2023), which is why it is especially unfortunate that some chapters contain many inaccuracies, shortcomings, and inconsistencies, particularly at the level of transcription. The present review will concentrate on the more general issues concerning the section, leaving aside the vast amount of linguistic material presented in the form of tables of inflectional forms and example sentences, which are undoubtedly a valuable resource for researchers interested in Samoyed languages, specialist and non-specialist alike.

The section on Samoyed consists of five chapters: first, a general introduction to Samoyed by Beáta Wagner-Nagy and Sándor Szeverényi (pp. 659–673), followed by more detailed synchronic descriptions of individual languages, with closely related ones grouped together into one chapter. Thus, Tundra Nenets and Forest Nenets are described in Chapter 35 by Svetlana Burkova (pp. 674–708), Tundra Enets and Forest Enets in Chapter 36 by Florian Siegl (pp. 709–753), and the Selkup languages in Chapter 37 by Olga Kazakevič (pp. 777–816). Separate chapters are dedicated to Nganasan (Beáta Wagner-Nagy, pp. 754–776) and Kamas (Gerson Klumpp, pp. 818–843). Sadly, there is no chapter on Mator, the most scarcely attested Samoyed language. The scant material that is available for Mator, which became extinct by the

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early nineteenth century, has been painstakingly analyzed by Helimski (1997). Readers new to the subject could benefit tremendously from a short, comprehensive introduction to these materials. Mator is seldom mentioned even in the introductory chapter, even if its many exceptional features make it very relevant from the point of view of diachronic reconstruction.

Coincidentally, it is the diachronic side of Samoyed studies which suffers from the greatest problems in the description that OGUL provides. While the foundations of Proto-Samoyed reconstruction were laid almost half a century ago in Janhunen's *Samojedischer Wortschatz* (1977), subsequent additions have not been incorporated into a single, easily accessible study, but rather they are left scattered across specialist papers, compiled in yet-to-be-published work, or even transmitted orally among active researchers. The introductory chapter on Samoyed by Wagner-Nagy and Szeverényi (pp. 659–673), however, does not provide the kind of comprehensive, updated review of diachronic research the field would need and deserve. The major updates that have been made to the Proto-Samoyed vowel system since Janhunen (1977) have not been taken into account in the reconstruction presented in this chapter (pp. 660–662). Although the authors do mention some of the recent changes in the reconstruction of the Proto-Samoyed vowel system (i.e. Helimski 2005, while other important works like Salminen 2012 are left unmentioned), these are not fully incorporated into the reconstruction presented in this chapter. Instead, many unorthodox choices have been made without explanation. For example, the authors have chosen to transcribe Proto-Samoyed *o as half-open ‹ɔ› and the low vowels as ‹ɛ, ä, a/å› (= Janhunen's *e, *ä, *å, which, after the split of *i into *e and *i by Helimski 2005, would be *ä, *a, *å). The "supposed" Proto-Samoyed vowel system in Table 34.1 (p. 660), with its four-way height distinction, is unlike any system argued for in the latest research.

Contrary to the authors' claims, the reconstruction of *ä (Janhunen 1977) as a low back vowel *a is no longer controversial but rather the most widely accepted solution (cf. Aikio 2006; Salminen 2012). Some choices made by the authors regarding the presentation of reconstructed material seem to reflect even a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of historical-linguistic reconstruction, namely the fact that phonetic values, given in square brackets, are ascribed to reconstructed sounds, as if the

authors were dealing with actual phonetic data. How do Szeverényi and Wagner-Nagy know, for example, that the Proto-Samoyed *ü was exactly [y], as they claim it to be?

It is not possible to give a detailed account of every error contained in the chapter, but it should suffice to mention a couple of the more prominent ones. For one, the recent discussion on first-syllable vs. second-syllable vowel systems (see e.g. Salminen 2012) is completely absent, and the authors variously cite either forms in accordance with the minimalistic system reconstructed by Janhunen (1977) such as *ə̂ntə̂j 'boat' (= *ə̂ntoj according to Salminen 2012: 340–341) or forms that allow a broader selection of second-syllable vowels, for example *ə̂mor- 'eat' (= Janhunen's *ə̂mə̂jr-) (p. 662), without any explanation. Equally unmotivated or plainly erroneous is the reconstruction of the vowel *ɔ (= *o) in some suffixes. For example, in the plural forms of personal suffixes of verbs (cf. Tundra Nenets 1PL.SUBJ *-maq*, 2PL.SUBJ *-raq*; Nganasan *-mU?*, *-RU?*, with the vowel alternation *u* ~ *a*, see Wagner-Nagy 2019: 79–80), the daughter languages clearly point to PS *måt, *råt, instead of the *-mɔt, *-rɔt that Wagner-Nagy and Szeverényi reconstruct (p. 665).

There are a few clear misinterpretations of previous research. For example, contrary to the authors' claims, the phenomenon in Tundra Nenets and Enets where a reduced vowel following the fricative *x* qualitatively assimilates to the vowel of the preceding syllable (p. 662), has nothing to do with traces of vowel harmony, but rather it should be viewed as purely phonetic (cf. Salminen 1997: 33–34, on Tundra Nenets). Instead, one could cite the accusative plural formation of Tundra Nenets as an example of a remnant of Proto-Samoyed vowel harmony (Salminen 2012: 340–342). One of the two examples meant to illustrate the phenomenon in Tundra Nenets is also transcribed incorrectly: ‹mɑn-kɑnɑ› 'in the bush' could be rendered either as **mənkənə or **mankana, depending on how one chooses to interpret ‹a›, while the phonologically accurate transcription according to the system used by e.g. Salminen (1993; 1997; 1998) would be *mən°kəna* (NOM.SG *mən°q*) (p. 662).

The claim that, in the Nenets languages, "the functions of singular case endings diverged, and the plural paradigm was formed using the original lative suffix PS *-kə̂tə̂" (citing Mikola 1988: 239; 2004: 102), is clearly some kind of misunderstanding. Juxtaposed with a general treatment of plural formation in the local cases, the wording gives the impression that that the Nenets languages formed the

whole plural paradigm with the lative suffix *-kâtâ, as opposed to *j in Nganasan and Enets local cases, or *t in Selkup. This is obviously not the case, as the plural forms of the local cases in Nenets are formed with the inherited suffix *t: Tundra Nenets DAT.PL *ŋənox°q* : LOC.PL *ŋənoxəqna* : ABL.PL *ŋənoxət°* (*ŋəno* 'boat'; data from Salminen 1997: 120) < Proto-Samoyed *ântoj-kâ-t : ântoj-kâ-t-nå : ântoj-kâ-t-tâ.

In the introductory chapter, very little attention is paid to Proto-Samoyed lexicon, although it has been a central topic of research since at least the publication of *Samojedischer Wortschatz* (Janhunen 1977). Lexical data is discussed quite superficially and mainly in chapters considering individual languages, which is probably not the most effective solution for a volume like this. For example, the long list of Kamas lexemes sorted by semantic fields such as hunting and fishing, clothing, or metallurgy and complemented with etymological notes (pp. 840–842), while impressive in its own right, can only encompass a fraction of the Kamas vocabulary. More extensive sources containing much of the same information already exist (i.e. Donner 1944; Joki 1952), and therefore, a more compact account of the main sources of Kamas borrowed lexicon and semantic spheres would have sufficed.

Turning to the chapters on individual Samoyed languages, a few problems are apparent concerning the phonological transcription of the Nenets languages. Apparently, two different transcriptions are employed by the authors of the volume, one by Wagner-Nagy and Szeverényi, and the other in Burkova's chapter on the Nenets languages, as well as in some of the Nenets examples found in the other chapters of the volume, if not cited according to the original source. The fact that, despite attempting to adopt a unified model of transcription, the volume ends up using two separate transcriptions for a language, is in itself troublesome. In the case of Nenets, both chosen transcriptions are unfortunate compromises between IPA and an attempt to accommodate language-specific phonological analysis, and end up somewhat misrepresenting the data. They both also differ from the transcription used by e.g. Salminen (1993; 1997; 1998) and, with slight modifications, Nikolaeva (2014), making it difficult for the reader to relate information to data found in the most prominent specialist publications on Tundra Nenets.

The two transcriptions found in OGUL often use symbols in an overlapping manner, making it very difficult for the reader to keep up; for example, Burkova uses ‹a› for /a/,

‹ʌ› for /ə/, and ‹°› for the special schwa, an allophone of /ə/ (cf. Salminen 1997: 37), when the latter is marked at all. While the choice to alter the conventional transcription to graphically resemble IPA seems unnecessary, the solution at least differentiates all Tundra Nenets vowels. This is not true for the transcription employed by Wagner-Nagy and Szeverényi, which does not mark the schwa /°/ at all and does not properly differentiate /ə/ from /a/ (cf. the aforementioned ‹mɑn-kɑnɑ› 'in the bush' for *mən°kəna*, p. 662). The example sentences Wagner-Nagy and Szeverényi present are cited in the transcription used in the original source, in this case Nikolaeva (2014) (p. 671). While Burkova's transcription is based on a phonological analysis, albeit an unconventional one (cf. below), Wagner-Nagy and Szeverényi do not give any explanation for their choice to use a different transcription.

The problems of transcription do not end with the introductory chapter but are also evident in Burkova's chapter on Nenets (pp. 674–708). Burkova states that the schwa of Forest Nenets – which is functionally very much like the one in Tundra Nenets but not predictable based on cognates (Salminen 2007: 358–360) – "will be marked only where it is necessary to specify the deep structure or where it is really pronounced" (p. 678). Consequently, the marking of the Forest Nenets schwa in this chapter, and most likely in the rest of the volume as well, is highly inconsistent and unreliable. In order to avoid the problem caused by the schwa, Burkova apparently opts for citing material from both Nenets varieties in supposedly phonetic transcription, indicated by square brackets. It is difficult to understand how this could be a good way to represent a language for which an elaborate phonological analysis already exists (cf. Salminen 1993; 1997: 37; 2007). Many of the Tundra Nenets forms could have also been checked from the reference work made for this purpose (Salminen 1998).

For Tundra Nenets, Burkova posits two glottal-stop phonemes that are, however, identical in pronunciation (p. 678). The number of glottal stops in Tundra Nenets has been a subject of debate in Samoyedology (cf. Janhunen 1986), but since it has been confirmed that there are no phonetic differences between morphophonologically or etymologically different glottal stops, the consensus has been to posit a single glottal stop phoneme with a dual transcription (i.e. ‹q›/‹h›) to indicate the two main patterns of morphophonological alternations (Salminen 1997: 37). Treating a phoneme that participates in two different kinds

of morphophonological alternations as two separate phonemes is, from the point of view of current mainstream phonological theory, an unorthodox approach, and one would at least expect the author to explain this choice. When no such explanation is given, the analysis of the Tundra Nenets glottal stop as two phonetically identical but morphophonologically different phonemes looks like a misunderstanding of Tundra Nenets phonology. The way of transcribing the glottal stops with a subscript digit, i.e. ‹ʔ$_1$› for the usual *q* and ‹ʔ$_2$› for *h*, is also unconventional and impractical from the reader's point of view, since these are more difficult to memorize than the symbols conventionally employed. The subscript *ʔ$_1$* is used also for the Forest Nenets glottal stop, despite Forest Nenets not having a functional equivalent to the Tundra Nenets *ʔ$_2$* (Salminen 2007: 362).

There are a few other strange and impractical solutions in the transcription of Tundra Nenets. For example, the marking of *æ* as long ‹æː› (p. 679) is redundant, since there is no short counterpart to contrast with it (cf. Salminen 2024: 195). On the basis of the Samoyed section of OGUL, it seems that the recent trend of using IPA or, in this case at least, a mix of IPA and various ad hoc solutions, even when there is an established transcription convention, has more problems than benefits to it.

The description of the synchronic morphology and syntax of the Nenets languages has fewer issues. Overall, the functions of different cases, tenses, moods, and other inflectional and derivational forms are illustrated with numerous examples taken from naturalistic data. The information on Tundra Nenets is in some cases more detailed than on Forest Nenets; for example, a selection of common derivational suffixes is given only for Tundra Nenets (pp. 703–704), though this is understandable, considering that Tundra Nenets has been documented and studied far more than Forest Nenets. The chapter attends well to the similarities and differences between Forest and Tundra Nenets, and treating them parallel in this manner seems like a reasonable solution in a volume like this.

The same can be said of Chapter 36 by Florian Siegl (pp. 709–753), which focuses on the Enets languages; Forest Enets and Tundra Enets are different enough to be considered separate languages – albeit closely related ones – but similar enough that treating them under a single chapter is justified and appropriate from a comparative perspective. Especially the juxtaposed tables on morphology (pp. 717–719) make comparing the two

languages very convenient for the reader. Siegl's treatment of Enets phonology (pp. 712–715) illustrates the essential characteristics of both Enets languages' phonemic systems and the differences between them in compact form, and while this description might require revisions and additions in the future, as Siegl himself also notes (p. 712), having an accessible comparative description as a point of reference, where previously there was none, is certainly useful. A small correction considering diachronic Enets phonology may, however, be made. Contrary to what Siegl claims (p. 713, footnote 7), the areal development resulting in the strengthening of PS *j to *d´* in initial position is not entirely a post-Castrénian phenomenon; although it is not attested in Castrén's materials, it does appear in Middendorf's manuscripts which predate them, and thus *j and *d´* may have been in free variation for a lengthy period (cf. Gusev 2020: 12).

Unlike languages such as Forest Nenets and Tundra Enets, which have previously been scarcely described in English-language scientific literature, Nganasan has recently gotten a full monograph-length grammatical description (Wagner-Nagy 2019). That grammar and the chapter of this volume are written by the same author, and for that reason, greatly resemble each other. Essentially, the chapter on Nganasan is a more compact version of the description provided in Wagner-Nagy (2019), containing the core parts of Nganasan phonology, morphology, and syntax. The treatment of Nganasan phonology (pp. 756–757) suffers from a few inconsistencies, although these are not as grave as those in the chapter on the Nenets languages. For example, one must ask why the "palatal stop" [c], which Wagner-Nagy considers an allophone of /t͡ʃ/, is listed separately in the table illustrating the Nganasan consonant system, but no other common allophones, such as the velar fricative [ɣ] for /g/ or voiceless labial stop [p] for /b/, are given (see Wagner-Nagy 2019: 34–39). Wagner-Nagy also confuses synchronic alternations with diachronic sound changes, when she claims on page 757 that "[t]he phoneme [j] is always deleted in intervocalic positions and otherwise mostly turned into [ɟ]; it is preserved only in word-final position and in some cases before consonants". However, the deletion of Proto-Samoyed *j in Nganasan intervocalically is a diachronic sound change, not directly connected to the prevocalic strengthening of [j] to [ɟ], as shown by forms where *j is preserved, e.g. Proto-Samoyed *käəj > Nganasan *śiəd´e* 'tongue' (strictly phonemically /śieje/).

The chapter on Selkup (Kazakevič, pp. 777–816) concentrates mostly on the Middle Taz variety of Northern Selkup (p. 777), which causes some uncertainty with regard to how universally the statements made in this chapter apply to the other Selkup varieties. Otherwise, the chapter works well as a description of at least the Middle Taz variety. However, since languages as close to each other as Forest Enets and Tundra Enets are consistently referred to as separate languages instead of dialects, it is strange that the Selkup languages, which are arguably more distinct from each other than the Enets languages, are referred to as dialects by Kazakevič. The phonotactic restrictions concerning vowels are mentioned only in passing (p. 783). With so many vowels (25, counting short and long ones as separate units), a table illustrating these restrictions would have been useful. Although an admirable effort is made to present words that display the alternation of nasal and stop, characteristic for Selkup, in such a manner that it is possible for the reader to immediately see which alternation occurs in each word, the subscript notation used for this purpose (p. 784) is clumsy, and one must ask whether such a notation is needed at all in the context of this handbook.

Overall, the chapters describing individual Samoyed languages in OGUL from a synchronic point of view serve as a handy reference work for researchers seeking information on a specific case marker or paradigm, for example. They are also a decent introduction to synchronic Samoyedology, at least when it comes to morphology and syntax, and they contain a large amount of essential references to the most important sources, where more information can be found. Many grammatical phenomena, such as case and person inflection, are illustrated with tables presenting the whole paradigm for a few example words, which makes it easy for the reader to get the gist of the subject quickly. From this point of view, the chapters on the less well-known Samoyed languages, such as Enets and Kamas, are of utmost value, albeit some details may have to be revised in the light of future research. Because Kamas has been officially extinct since the death of the last speaker Klavdija Plotnikova in 1989, all further descriptive work on the language relies purely on previous documentation. Thus, the detailed attention paid to the history of the documentation of Kamas and different archival sources by Klumpp (pp. 818–820) deserves a special mention.

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