



# DIACHRONIC CHANGE IN ERZYA WORD STRESS

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The Mordvin languages, Erzya and Moksha, are probably the closest linguistic relatives to the Finnic group. An unusual feature of Erzya is its word stress, which differs from at least most other languages insofar as speakers may lay stress on any syllable they wish. It is difficult to fit such word stress into any existing typology. I have called this type of word stress preferential.

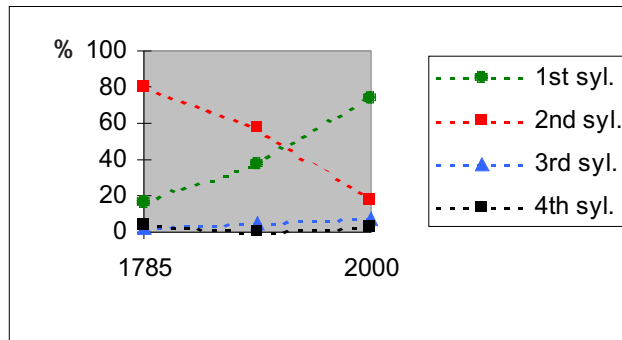
The aim of this research has been, in the first instance, to resolve five matters. (1) The extent to which Erzya word stress has changed over the last two hundred years; a comparison was made with extant documentary evidence, (2) whether or not

Erzya word stress is systematic, (3) whether there has been similar change in Moksha word stress, (4) the acoustic parameters of Erzya word stress and, (5) whether Proto-Finno-Ugrian word stress has been reflected in the prosodic development of the Mordvin languages.

The first matter has been resolved on the basis of historical documentation, the so-called Damaskin Dictionary from the year 1785 (published in Feoktistov 1971) and a Short Catechism dated 1788 (full text in Feoktistov 1968). An analysis of these showed that slightly over two hundred years ago word stress was, for the most part, statistically on the second syllable, whereas today it is on the first syllable with almost the same regularity. This research also confirmed that, whereas today word stress is

near the beginning of the word, two hundred years ago it was, on average, nearer the end of the word. The figure below shows the development of word stress since 1785–

1788. The bends in the curves at a point in between are based on evidence left by Heikki Paasonen (1903). This figure demonstrates how rapidly word stress can change.



As far as the next matter is concerned, it must be said that although Erzya word stress has earlier generally been on the second syllable, and nowadays it is predominantly on the first syllable, the analysed material clearly demonstrates how then and now the speaker is free to place stress in accordance with personal preferences. The position of word stress is not structurally determined, and the speaker may, in general, stress any syllable desired. In this respect, Erzya is something of an exceptional language.

The third point concerns the other Mordvin language, Moksha. It appears from the research that a similar development to Erzya has taken place Moksha, at least since the year 1785. It would seem that Moksha has gone ahead of Erzya, as it were, and that word stress is coming to rest regularly on the first syllable. However, in the case of Moksha it is difficult to draw any definite conclusions on account of the fragmentary nature of the evidence.

The acoustic correlates of modern Erzya word stress were also studied. Although

fundamental frequency ( $F_0$ ) is normally regarded as the most important acoustic parameter in the production of word stress, it would seem that in the case of Erzya intensity measured as amplitude is a more significant feature than  $F_0$ , as is also acoustic length (duration). On the other hand,  $F_0$  is evidently a more important parameter in producing sentence stress. In this respect also Erzya is probably a less common language.

Finally, what can be said about word stress in the Proto-Finno-Ugrian language in the light of the recent historical development of Mordvin? The prosodic development of these languages is far from easy to determine. Nevertheless, no findings in the research material imply that first syllable word stress has been inherited from Proto-Mordvin or some other proto-language. Similar statements could also be made regarding the other Finno-Ugrian languages in this region of Russia.

Furthermore, this research has shown, or at least drawn attention to the fact, that nowadays disyllabic words are somewhat

regularly initially stressed, although word stress is rather evenly distributed in the case of polysyllabic words. On the other hand, there were conflicting findings in analyses of the relative attraction of different vowels. The results also supported an assertion that today lists are read with initial stress.

The philological investigation of the extant documents was based on a statistical analysis of databases created from these for that specific purpose, and the present-day material has been examined by measuring the acoustic parameters.

Although I have attempted to describe the phonological features of the Erzya language and its dialects, less attention has been paid to morphology and syntax. The reason for this is that at least descriptions of these latter are already available to some extent in English, and phonology has been closer to the subject at hand, although this is not to deny the relevance of morphology and syntax. Therefore, this does not mean that studying stems and suffixes would not increase the understanding of Erzya word stress. This is something to take into consideration in the future.

In summary, it can be stated that even though the feature of word stress exists and has existed in Erzya historically, in the final instance it is and has been realised through individual speaker preferences. This can be termed preferential word stress, because the speaker's word stress pattern is determined statistically by personal preferences. Bearing this in mind, we can conclude that during the last two hundred years Erzya has been a language whose word stress could only be partially predicted, and which during this period at least has never had a comprehensive structural word stress system. ■

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