

# The Northern Samoyedic interrogative verbs

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## A new project: ThEA

- Theoretical and experimental approaches to dialectal variation and contact-induced change: a case study of Tundra Nenets (Grant Nr: 129235; 2018–2022; Research Institute for Linguistics HAS)
- The syntax and prosody of interrogatives in Tundra Nenets dialects
- Participants:
  - Nikolett Mus (PI)
  - Péter Rebrus (phonology)
  - Katalin Mády (phonetics, prosody)
  - Uwe Reichel (prosody, computational linguistics)
  - Réka Metzger (computational linguistics)

## Categories of interrogatives

- A set of interrogative elements in content questions seems to be universal in the languages.
- There is a rare category of interrogative words, i.e. the interrogative verb, which lacks a detailed description.
- The typical characteristics associated with the interrogative verbs:
  - they function as (main or secondary) predicates of the clause;
  - they can combine with any of the morphemes available for verbs.

(van der Auwera & Idiatov 2004; Cysouw 2004; Idiatov 2006; Hagège 2008)

## Samoyedic interrogative verbs

- Some interrogative verbs are reported in the Samoyedic languages with the meaning ‘say what’, ‘do what’ and ‘how (can) not’.

	‘say what’	‘do what’	‘how (can) not’
Tundra Nenets	+	–	+
Forest Nenets	+	?	+
Tundra Enets	+	?	?
Forest Enets	+	?	?
Nganasan	+	?	?
Selkup	–	+	?

(Tereshchenko 1973, Siegl 2013, Nikolaeva 2014)

## The UTTERANCE-type

- I will focus here on the interrogative verbs of the UTTERANCE-type, i.e. ‘say what’ (1).

(1) *níśar*      *Sashan*      *xaʔmaŋa?*  
father.2SG    Sasha.DAT    what.say.CO.3SG

‘What has your father said to Sasha?’ [TN]

- This semantic type of interrogative verbs can only be found in the Northern Samoyedic languages, e.g. Tundra Nenets *xaʔman-*, Forest Enets *kođumá-*, Nganasan *kumunsa-*.

## The UTTERANCE-type (cont.)

- It is missing from the Southern Samoyedic languages.
- In (2), there is a separate interrogative ‘what’ and a verb ‘speak, say’.

(2) *tan qaj tomta-l?*  
2SG what speak-2SG>SG

‘What do you say?’ (Tereshchenko 1973: 92)

[Sel]

## The UTTERANCE-type (cont.)

- Nikolaeva (2014: 265) makes the following observations about this verb type in Tundra Nenets:
  - it can form a complete sentence;
  - it has regular verbal morphology.

# Questions

- What syntactic functions can the interrogative verb fulfil in the clause (and what is the difference between the verbal and non-verbal interrogative predicates)?
- What morphological markers, i.e. agreement and TAM, can the interrogative verb take?
- What further interrogative phrases can the interrogative verb combine with in multiple questions?



## Towards a possible analysis

- The semantically general verb meaning ‘say’ has incorporated a wh-object.
- The incorporation affects the morphology and syntax of the verb:
  - (i) the interrogative verb does not have a full verbal paradigm: it cannot show object agreement;
  - (ii) it behaves like verbs in interrogative clauses: it takes the interrogative mood suffix in the past instead of the regular past tense marker.

# Outline

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Summary

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## The availability of the relevant data

- Tundra Nenets: grammars, corpus, consultations with a native speaker
- Forest Nenets: Ø
- Tundra Enets: Ø
- Forest Enets: grammars, texts
- Nganasan: grammars, corpus

→ exclude Forest Nenets and Tundra Enets

→ some generalizations may only hold for Tundra Nenets

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## Function in the discourse

- The answer to a question containing the interrogative verb cannot be a simple ‘Yes’ or ‘No’ (3).

(3) A. *pidar xa?manɣan?*

‘What have you said?’

B. *\*ɣaʔ. / \*nʲiɣaʔ.*

‘Yes.’ / ‘No.’

[TN]

- The interrogative verb does not question the truth value of the utterance.
- It constitutes a content question.

## Function in the clause

- The interrogative verb can function as the predicate of the clause: it agrees with its subject in person and number (4).

(4) *pidar xaʔman-ŋa-n?*  
2SG what.say-CO-2SG

‘What have you said?’ [TN]

- Predicate interrogative words can also agree with their subjects without copula support (5).

(5) *pidar xibá-n?*  
2SG who-2SG

‘Who are you?’ [TN]

## Function in the clause (cont.)

- Predicate interrogatives cannot take tense marker, i.e. future in TN and FE and all tenses in Nganasan, a copula is used instead.

(6) *pidar xibá-n ηæ-ηku-n?*  
 2SG who-2SG be-FUT-2SG

‘Who you will be?’

[TN]

- The interrogative verb takes the future marker on its own (7).

(7) *pidar xaʔman-da-n?*  
 2SG what.say-FUT-2SG

‘What will you say?’

[TN]



## Function in the clause (cont.)

- Interrogative words need not be used as predicates, e.g. they can be subjects (8).

(8) *xíba to?*  
 who come.3SG

‘Who comes?’

[TN]

- The interrogative verb can only function as the predicate of the main or the embedded clause.

# Incorporation: argument structure

- (9) *pidar tiki nu-nʔ xaʔmaŋaʔ*  
 2SG that child-DAT what.say.CO.3SG

‘What have you said to that child?’

[TN]

S <sub>[NOM]</sub>	IO <sub>[DAT]</sub>	O <sub>[∅]</sub> - say
agent	recipient	theme - say

- The interrogative verb has three arguments one of which is incorporated.

## Incorporation: diachronic facts

- The interrogative verb form is analysable at least diachronically: \*PS interrogative stem \**ku-* ‘what, which’ and the verb \**mâ(n)-* ‘say’ (Janhunen 1977: 75).
- This interrogative verb form is not transparent: it is not the question word meaning ‘what’ (TN *ɲamke*, FE *obu*, Ng *maa*) that is incorporated into the verb meaning ‘say’.

(10) *ɲamke-mʔ xætaʔ*  
 what-ACC tell-3SG

‘What has (s)he told?’

[TN]

## Evidence for wh-object incorporation: object agreement

- The interrogative verb does not display object–verb agreement (11).

(11) *pidar xaʔman-ŋa-ʔr?*  
 2SG what.say-CO-2SG>SG

‘What have you said?’

[TN]

- Generally, verbs do not agree with wh-objects (12).

(12) *naćeki-ʔ ŋamge-mʔ mańije-ʔ/\*-doʔ?*  
 child-PL what-ACC watch-3PL/-3PL>SG

‘What are the children watching?’

[TN]

→ the wh-object in (11) is incorporated

## Note on object agreement

- In NS, object agreement serves to mark the topicality of the object element (13) (Siegl 2013; Nikolaeva 2014).

(13) a. *What did a/the man do to the/a reindeer?*

b. *xasawa ti-m xada-da / \*xada.*  
 man reindeer-ACC kill-3SG>SG / kill.3SG

‘A/the man killed a/the reindeer.’

(Dalrymple & Nikolaeva 2011: 132)

- Wh-objects inquire about unknown, discourse new information, so they do not control agreement on the verb.

## Evidence for wh-incorporation: interrogative mood

- In the past, the interrogative verb is combined with the interrogative mood marker (TN *-śa-*, FE *-sa-*, Ng *-hu-*) (14).

(14) *pidar xaʔman-śa-n?*  
 2SG what.say-INTER-2SG

‘What did you say?’

[TN]

- The interrogative verb never takes the regular past tense marker (15).

(15) *pidar xaʔman-na- \*ʒ?*  
 2SG what.say-2SG-PST

‘What did you say?’ hfill[TN]

## Evidence for wh-incorporation: interrogative mood (cont.)

- In the Northern Samoyedic languages, the interrogative mood marker is in complementary distribution with the past tense marker: the first occurs in questions (16) and the second in declaratives (17).

(16) *śaxa? pidar to-śa-n?*  
when 2SG come-INTER-2SG

‘When did you arrive?’

[TN]

(17) *ťiki jaľa mań to-dam-ź.*  
this day 1SG come-1SG-PST

‘I arrived today.’

[TN]

## A note on interrogative mood in Nganasan

- In Nganasan, the interrogative mood is marked in the present and the future as well.
- The interrogative verb can take the interrogative mood marker in all tenses.

(18) *tahariābə* *tə* *kumun-tə-ŋu* *ŋiāntu-rbiʔ* *īaʔ*  
 now well what.say-FUT-INTER.3SG young.manAUG  
 ‘What can the lad say?’



## Combinability in multiple questions (in TN)

- In Tundra Nenets, the interrogative verb can appear in multiple questions with, e.g. interrogative subject (19) or interrogative indirect object (20).

(19) *xíba xaʔman-ŋa?*  
 who what.say-CO.3SG

‘Who said what?’

(20) *xíba-n xaʔman-ŋa-n?*  
 who-DAT what.say-CO-2SG

‘What did you say to whom?’

## Combinability in multiple questions (in TN) (cont.)

- The Tundra Nenets interrogative verb cannot appear with the adverbial interrogative ‘how’ in a multiple question (22).

(21) \**pidar xanz'er? xa?man-ŋa-n?*  
 2SG how what.say-CO-2SG  
 ‘How did you say what?’

- The wh-object precedes the wh-adverb in TN multiple questions.

(22) *pidar ŋamge-m? xanz'er? pær-ŋa-n?*  
 2SG what-ACC how do-CO-2SG  
 ‘How did you do what?’

- The relative order of the wh-object and the wh-adverb disallows the interrogative verb appearing together with the wh-adverb ‘how’.

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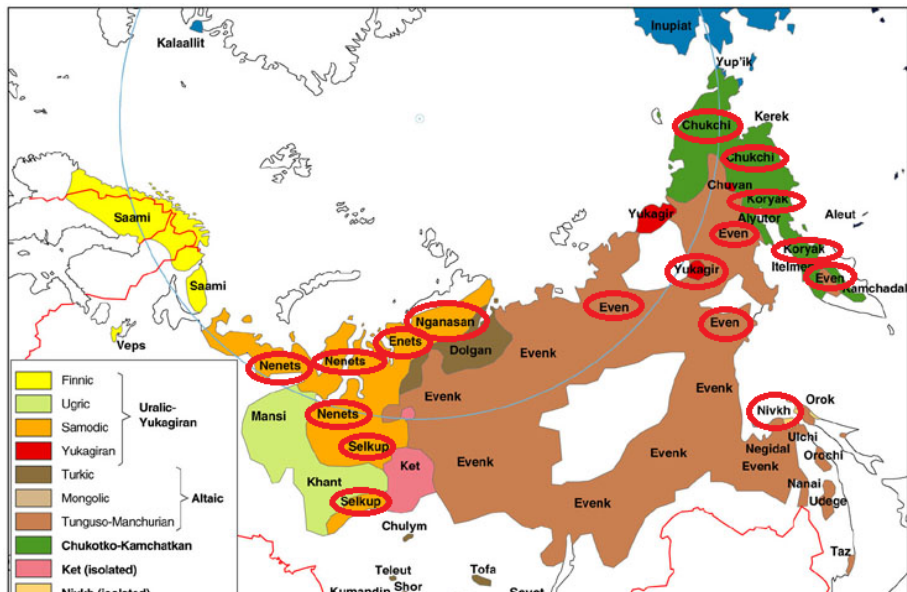
- The UTTERANCE-type of interrogative verbs is found in (Kolyma) Yukagir, too (Hagège's 2008) (23).

(23) *monohot-ček?*  
 what.say-2SG

‘What did you say?’ (Hagège 2008: 7; Maslova 2003: 480)

- Further interrogative verbs, e.g. with the meaning ‘do what’, is found in the North-Siberian languages.

## Interrogative verbs in North-Siberia



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- The UTTERANCE-type interrogative verb in the Northern Samoyedic languages examined:
  - functions as the predicate of (main and embedded) clauses;
  - has an incorporated wh-object;
  - agrees exclusively with its subject and does not display object agreement;
  - combines with the interrogative mood marker instead of the regular past tense marker in past tense;
  - cannot be combined with every interrogative word;
  - might be an areal feature in the North-Siberian area.

# Thank you!

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