

NORTH SAMOYED AND THE MYSTERIOUS *SPRACHBUND*¹

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North Samoyed languages (Nenets, Enets and Nganasan) possess a number of typologically rare features. Some of these features — such as consonant gradation or the system of so-called “conjugations” — are present in other Uralic languages and are, thus, inherited. Some other can be found in the neighbouring (Tungusic) languages and thus can be attributed to a relatively recent areal influence; such are, for instance, the destinative inflection or the use of negative forms to express affirmative meaning.

There are, however, some peculiarities of North Samoyed, which are not found either in genetically related or in geographically close languages. Such are, for instance, the auditive and the interrogative forms of the verb.

The auditive in Siberia, except North Samoyed and Northern Selkup (in the latter case evidently due to a contact influence), is only present in Yukaghir. The interrogative is not present anywhere else in Siberia.

There are also features, which North Samoyed shares with some of its eastern neighbours, notably Evenki and Even, but not with Southern Tungusic languages. Such are “tensed” nominal forms (it is not discussed here whether they are really parallel to the tense forms of the verbs in the present-day grammatical systems): the destinative and the anterior, first of which is used for the prospective possession (‘a sledge destined to me’), and second for disused or broken things (‘a broken sledge’). The same may be true for the intracitics with a discursive meaning such as ‘as concerns X’, ‘only X’ etc.

Of course, North Samoyed may have developed all these features independently. But one can hypothesise that such a whole cluster of typologically rare forms is due to an areal influence from some other language or language group, which is now extinct. Northern Tungusic languages have probably also been influenced by it, but naturally not in an exactly the same way.

Some of the features typical for the North Samoyed are attested in North America. The auditive is present in Penutian and Pomoan languages on the Pacific coast. The auditive and the tensed nominals are extensively used in Eskimo.

Another trait common for North Samoyed, on the one hand, and for languages of Alaska and Northern Canada (as well as Chukchi), on the another, is the use of the attribute ‘real’ or ‘genuine’ for self-designation.

It can be supposed that the ancestors of the present-day Nenets, Enets and Nganasans, having come to the Lower Yenisey area, found there a language that was a remnant of the older linguistic type close to some present-day languages of the North America. (Though, of course, not necessarily genetically connected to them.) They had this language as their substrate and borrowed some parts of its structure. The influence of the same linguistic type can be found in Northern Tungusic, Yukaghir, and Chukotko-Kamchatkan languages.

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