

Bells and Whistles of Sami Quantity

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Northern Sami is known for having three consonant lengths and intricate alternations in consonant clusters and geminates. The difference between long and short foot-medial consonants and clusters is enhanced in a multitude of ways, resulting in alternations between close vs. open transition, with and without assimilation, unaspirated vs. preaspirated stops, voiced vs. voiceless stops, plain vs. prestopped nasals, etc. These modifications all seem to be enhancements of basic contrasts in quantity. In vowels, the length contrast in Northern Sami is enhanced by diphthongization of long vowels under stress, and by differences in vowel height in unstressed footed syllables.

The contrast between single and geminated consonants is similarly enhanced in other languages. In e.g. Icelandic and Norwegian dialects, geminated stops are preaspirated, whereas sonorants are prestopped. In Northern Sami, the distinctions in foot-medial clusters have become bearers of morphemic differences, taking over from older suffixes. The morpheme-bearing function has strengthened the need for enhancement.

Enhancements of consonant length are also present in Southern Sami, which may never have depended on consonant quantity as the sole correlate of morphemic distinctions. What seems to have happened historically, is that these previously redundant embellishments of the consonant length distinction have taken on the job of enhancing morphemic distinctions in Northern Sami. Redundancy is good, and especially good for enhancing morphemic distinctions.