

Ket Polysynthesis

Edward Vajda
(Western Washington University)

The Yeniseian family contains the severely endangered Ket, along with several vanished sister languages. Two of the family's primary branches, including modern Ket and the now extinct Kott, were documented to a degree that permits reconstruction of the Proto-Yeniseian verb template, which appears to have persisted relatively unchanged for at least 1,500 years. The complex prefixing structure of the Ket verb is typologically distinct for Northern Asia. Conjugated verb forms adhere to a rigid-position class model consisting of a root-like base, eight prefixes, and one suffix. Prefix positions 5 and 7 contain lexical morphemes that create a discontinuous stem together with the base. The other position classes contain tense-mood or subject/object markers, which are typically interdigitated among the three lexical positions. Inflectional categories are limited to past and non-past indicative vs. imperative mood, and subject/object agreement in person, number and class (3rd person masculine, feminine, or inanimate). The choice of tense-mood affixes as well as a particular stem's positional configuration of subject/object markers is lexically determined. Ket has six productive tense-mood classes, five intransitive agreement configurations, and three transitive configurations. This talk assesses Ket verb structure in light of its historical development.