Areal and Phonotactic Distribution of η

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Of all the sounds commonly found in phonemic inventories of the world’s languages, there are few, if any, sounds that have a more areally or phonotactically definable distribution than the velar nasal. In this brief report, I present a discussion of the areal and phonotactic distribution of this common sound based on a database of 493 languages representing a wide spectrum of languages from across the globe.

The areal distribution of the presence vs. absence of phonemic η among the languages of the world is indeed striking. For example, phonemic η is very rare in European languages but is universal in Australian Aboriginal languages. However, determining whether a language has phonemic η is not always so straightforward. For example, the sound occurs as a phonetic variant or allophone of the extremely common nasal sound n. A related, minor complicating factor in determining the phonemic status of η, in particular in those speech varieties where it may occur in initial position, is the presence in languages of prenasalized stops, i.e. ə̝g- ə̝k-. Some languages, e.g. Swahili, actually contrast [ŋ] and /n-g/ (~ [ŋ-g]) in word-initial position (1).

À propos to the phonotactics of phonemic η, one finds an even more striking areal distribution across the world’s languages. For example, while phonemic η is found in all of the ten language families and isolate groups of Siberia, it is found word-initially in only those languages spoken in northern and eastern Siberia, e.g. Nganasan, Kerek, Nivkh, Yukaghir, and Even (2). Some of the world’s languages permit η only in syllable-final or coda-position, never in initial or onset position (3). These include such languages as Burushaski, Hmong Njua, and West Greenlandic Eskimo.

Still other languages do not permit this sound in coda-position at all (4). These include Fijian, Gooniyandi, and Supyire, among others. Less frequently, certain languages (5) allow η only in syllable initial or onset-position, for example Eastern Kayah Li, a Tibeto-Burman language of Myanmar.

From a macro-areal perspective, virtually all Australian and Southeast Asian languages have both phonemic and word-initial η-. Certain Papuan languages (e.g. Kâte or Eipo) possess η- as well as a certain number of New World languages (Lummi, Soclipan Chinantec, Gavião) but overall, η- is not that common in these parts of the world. None of the handful of the European and Western Asian languages with phonemic η permits this sound in word-initial position, nor do the languages of western and central Siberia, where phonemic η is nearly universal. Thus, there is a large block of languages from Europe to central Siberia with phonemic η that do not allow the sound word-initially. The majority of the Native American languages of California with phonemic η do not permit the sound word-initially, while elsewhere (Africa, South America, Papua), phonemic but non-initial η occurs only sporadically.

In the case of languages that allow phonemic η in word-final or syllable coda position, but not in word-initial or syllable onset position, we find a potential violation of the well-known
dictum, usually attributed first to Roman Jakobson (1941), that coda-position allows fewer contrasts or phonemes than onset position.

(1) Swahili

\[ \eta oa \] vs. \[ ngoa \]

'root up' 'passion, lust'

Johnson and Madan (1939/1991:335)

(2) Nganasan  Kerek  Nivkh

\[ \eta uka\'c\]  \[ m\eta y\eta \]  \[ \eta m k \]

'many, a lot' 'tail' 'seven'


(3) Burushaski  Hmong Njua  West Greenlandic Eskimo

\[ a\eta ij \]  \[ t\eta \]  \[ aki\eta \]

'my hand' 'edible gourd' 'answer me'

(own field notes)  Lyman (1979: 10)  Vakhtin (1997: 98)

(4) Fijian  Gooniyandi  Supvire

\[ g\eta o n e \eta u l i \]  \[ g\eta i \]  \[ \eta 55 \]  \[ \eta \eta i g\eta \]

'student' 'I' 'sleep' 'scratch'


(5) Eastern Kayah Li

\[ \eta \eta \eta \]  'language'; 'weep'

Solnit (1997: 351)

References


Moscow: Indrik.