

# Chapter 6

## Functions of placeholder words in Evenki

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Placeholders are used to fill in the pause when the speaker has forgotten the exact word. They have the syntactic properties of the word the speaker cannot recall (the target word). Studying placeholders is thus important for understanding how discourse works. However, the area has been much understudied, especially for low-resource languages, due to the lack of oral corpora. This paper fills in this lacuna for the Evenki language. It describes the functions of placeholders and their grammatical properties, drawing on data from oral corpora and elicitation. More specifically, it looks into the transfer of grammatical features from the target word to the placeholder. Dialectal distribution of placeholders and their correlates in other Tungusic languages are also discussed.

### 1 Introduction

#### 1.1 Placeholder words

In conversation, speakers can employ a number of devices in case they hesitate or have forgotten the exact word. “Non-silence devices” which are used to fill in the pause are called fillers. More specifically, fillers “fulfilling the syntactic projection” of a phrase (in contrast to interjections) are called placeholders (see Fox 2010 for a discussion of the terms). For many languages, corpus-based placeholder studies may be difficult. Firstly, placeholder words were usually omitted in older published materials, which are not accompanied by audio. Secondly, the very technique of writing down texts without speech recorders (such as asking



the speaker to dictate) may have forced the speakers to use fewer placeholder words.

## 1.2 The Evenki language

In this work, a study of placeholder words in the Evenki language is performed. Evenki is an endangered Tungusic language spoken in Russia, China and Mongolia. In Russia, there are fewer than 5000 speakers (*Russian census* 2010). For China, a number of 11 000 is given in *Ethnologue* (2019) but we should take into account that the traditional Chinese classification counts Solon, Aoluguya and Khamnigan Evenki as Evenki dialects whereas Oroqen is considered a separate language (Tsumagari 1992). However, Oroqen is actually closer to the Russian Evenki dialects (as well as Aoluguya and Khamnigan Evenki) than Solon. Therefore, if we count only dialects of Evenki proper in China, there are roughly 2500 Oroqen speakers (Whaley & Li 2000), fewer than 200 Aoluguya speakers (Tsumagari 1992), and fewer than 1000 Khamnigan Evenki speakers (Whaley 1998). As regards Mongolia, the Khamnigan Evenki language seems to be extinct. This paper addresses the Evenki dialects of Russia due to the lack of oral speech corpora from China or Mongolia.

The Evenki language is spread over a huge territory and comprises numerous dialects, which are quite different from each other. Vasilevich (1948) provides a classification of the Evenki dialects spoken in the former USSR, dividing them into three groups: Northern, Southern, and Eastern (see Figure 1 for a map).

## 1.3 Notes on Evenki morphology

In this paper, placeholders are analyzed from the morphological point of view. Therefore, a brief introduction into the Evenki morphology will be given here.

Evenki is an agglutinating language with rich derivational and inflectional morphology. Nedjalkov lists the following morphological classes in Evenki (Nedjalkov 1997: 139–140):

- nouns
- pronouns
- verbs
- adjectives

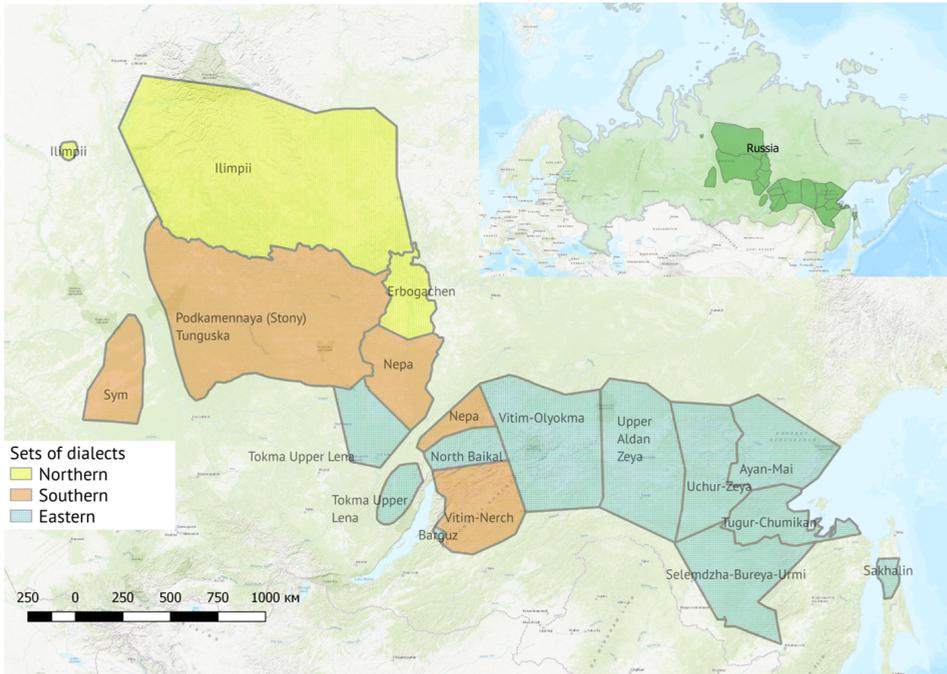


Figure 1: Evenki dialects of Russia (based on Vasilevich 1948, redrawn by Nadezhda Mamontova)

- postpositions (usually nominal stems with a locative meaning, having possessive suffixes)
- numerals/quantifiers
- particles (including what is called an adverb in traditional classifications)

A nominal wordform has the template shown in Table 1. For example:

- (1)  $bəjə_1 \ \emptyset_2 \ -ŋi_3 \ \ -l_4 \ -ba_5 \ -w_6$   
 person      -IND.POSS -PL -ACC -1SG.POSS  
 ‘<told about> my people’
- (2)  $əwi:1 \ -wu_2 \ \emptyset_3 \ -r_4 \ -ə_5 \ \ -tin_6$   
 play -NMLZ      -PL -ACCIN -3PL.POSS  
 ‘<made> toys for them’

Verbal wordforms can be finite or non-finite (participles and converbs), depending on whether it can be the only verbal form in an independent clause.<sup>1</sup> A finite verb form has the following template (Table 2).<sup>2</sup>

Table 1: Nominal template  
(Bulatova & Grenoble 1999:  
15)

1	stem
2	derivational affixes
3	alienable possession
4	number
5	case
6	inalienable possession

Table 2: Finite verbal  
template (Bulatova &  
Grenoble 1999: 27)

1	stem
2	derivational affixes
3	voice
4	aspect
5	mood+tense
6	mood+number

For example:

- (3)  $\widehat{t}fa_1 -ti_2 -pka:3 -l_4 -d\partial_5 -n_6 =da:$   
 tea -VBLZ -CAUS -INCH -NFUT -3SG -FOC  
 ‘She started to give tea to drink.’

Non-finite verb forms can have personal or number endings, which depends on the actual participial or converbial form itself. A non-finite verb form has therefore the scheme shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Non-finite verbal template

1	stem
2	derivational affixes
3	voice
4	aspect
5	participial or converbial affix
6	person + number/ number
7	case (for participles)
8	inalienable possession (for participles)

<sup>1</sup>Actually, there are rare cases of non-finite forms used independently in oral speech.

<sup>2</sup>Some aspect affixes can precede voice affixes. There can be several aspect affixes in a verb form (Tables 2–3).

(4) is an example of a converb with no personal endings, (5) is a converb with personal endings, and (6) is a participle.

(4) *bori*<sub>1</sub>  $\emptyset$ <sub>2</sub> *-ma:t*<sub>3</sub> *-tʃə*<sub>4</sub> *-nə*<sub>5</sub> *-l*<sub>6</sub>  
 share -RECIP -IPFV -CVSIM -PL  
 ‘<They live> sharing with each other.’

(5) *hokori*<sub>1</sub> *-w*<sub>2</sub>  $\emptyset$ <sub>3</sub>  $\emptyset$ <sub>4</sub> *-rak*<sub>5</sub> *-tin*<sub>6</sub>  
 lose -PASS -CVCOND -3PL  
 ‘if they are lost.’

(6) *boyolo*<sub>1</sub>  $\emptyset$ <sub>2</sub>  $\emptyset$ <sub>3</sub> *-t*<sub>4</sub> *-tʃə*<sub>4</sub> *-ri*<sub>5</sub>  $\emptyset$ <sub>6</sub> *-duk*<sub>7</sub> *-tin*<sub>8</sub>  
 deprive.of.share -DUR -IPFV -PSIM -ABL -3PL.POSS  
 ‘because of their depriving of the share.’

All wordforms can be followed by a clitic (as in 3).

## 1.4 Aims

The aims of this work are as following:

- Describe various placeholder words in the Evenki language. To my knowledge, no comprehensive work of such kind has ever been done.
- Define the functions of the placeholder words and compare them to the functions observed typologically.

## 1.5 Methods

The study is mainly based on a corpus of texts, which have been recorded, transcribed and analyzed by a group of linguists, including the author of this work (Siberian-Lang corpus 2019). The material was recorded in 2007–2018 in Tomsk oblast, Krasnoyarsk krai and Irkutsk oblast. The corpus comprises mainly texts recorded from speakers of the Northern dialect group. A corpus of oral Evenki texts recorded in Krasnoyarsk krai by Nadezhda Mamontova in 2014 is also used (Corpora IEA 2019). Another source is descriptive grammars of the Evenki language: Konstantinova (1964), Nedjalkov (1997), and Bulatova & Grenoble (1999). Both corpora are more focused on the Northern and Southern Evenki dialects, while data on the Eastern dialects is scarce. Furthermore, the corpora of related Tungusic languages have been studied.

I conducted several elicitation experiments in Krasnoyarsk krai, Irkutsk oblast, and Khabarovsk krai. The design was straightforward: the speakers were given sentences containing placeholders and asked whether the sentences sounded acceptable and which words could be used instead. However, when analyzing the elicitation results, it should be taken into account that the status of the placeholder words is very low among the speakers. They are often referred to as “slips of the tongue” or “just insertions to connect the words together”. Sometimes a speaker says about a particular placeholder that there is no such word, although they still use it in their own speech. Still, some speakers recall “people using these words in the past when telling something”, and even try to distinguish the meanings of the placeholders.

## 2 Placeholder words in Evenki

In this section, placeholder words in Evenki will be described in detail according to the following plan, which roughly follows Podlesskaya (2010).

1. *Functions as a placeholder*: The placeholder can be used in various pragmatic circumstances, which will be further described in greater detail.
2. *Restrictions on the target word*: The target word is the word the speaker cannot recall. Therefore, it is replaced with a placeholder. Typologically, there can be placeholders which replace only words of specific classes (e. g., only nouns, or only proper nouns).
3. *Functions other than those of a placeholder*: Data from other languages show that some placeholder stems can also be used as interjections or hesitation markers without actually replacing any target word.
4. *Mirroring the grammatical shape of the target word*: The placeholder can copy inflectional and/or derivational affixes from the target word, thus reflecting its structure. Podlesskaya (2010) calls this mirroring. The target word is then sometimes recalled, so we can compare its surface realization to that of the placeholder. Typological studies show that there is sometimes no mirroring at all. In other cases, mirroring can be full (copying all affixes) or partial (copying only some of them).
5. *Frequency*: We can leverage corpus data to understand how frequent a particular placeholder is, and whether it depends on the dialect, on the speaker’s age, gender, or fluency in Evenki, as well as on the genre of the text.

6. *Dialectal distribution of a placeholder*: As shown above, the Evenki comprises various dialects that may display different behaviour in terms of placeholders.
7. *Possible source and comparative data from related languages*: In typological literature on placeholders, they are often traced to a pronoun or to a noun meaning ‘thing’. It is therefore crucial to trace the etymology of the placeholder, if possible. Evenki is a Northern Tungusic language, so I will use available data from other Northern as well as Southern Tungusic languages to indicate the etymology of common placeholders.

In all examples, the placeholder word will be put in **bold**, whereas the correspondent target phrase will be underlined. In translations, “whatsitsname” and “do that thing” will be used.

## 2.1 *aŋə / aŋi*

In the Evenki grammars, *aŋi* is described as a placeholder, though this exact term is not always used. In Konstantinova (1964: 265) it is called a demonstrative particle meaning ‘whatsitsname, something’. In Bulatova & Grenoble (1999: 24, 26) it is classified as an interrogative pronoun as well as a placeholder, and its use in both nominal and verbal roots is described. In the corpus texts, it is pronounced as either *aŋə* or *aŋi*. It seems to be more frequently pronounced as *aŋə* when it is used independently, without any affixes. Furthermore, the stem is sometimes shortened to *aŋ*, without the final vowel. However, (10) shows that the final vowel is not just a connecting or epenthetic vowel (otherwise the form would be \**aŋ-tiki*: and not *aŋi-tki*:). Prosodically, *aŋi* is often followed with a pause. However, this can be justified by the speaker actively trying to recall the target word. Generally speaking, intonation in Evenki is understudied (see, for example Morozova & Androsova 2019). Therefore, I will not go into greater detail regarding intonation.

### 2.1.1 Functions as a placeholder

*aŋi* is used widely if the speaker cannot recall the exact word to ensure the fluency of the narrative. For example, in (7) there are two instances of *aŋi* for two nouns, which are both repaired on the spot. In (8), the first occurrence of the placeholder is repaired but the second is not.

- (7) *aŋi-l*                    *bəjə-l*            *aŋi-l-tin*                    *igi-l-tin*  
 whatsitsname-PL person-PL whatsitsname-PL-3PL.POSS voice-PL-3PL.POSS  
*do:ldi-w-ra-∅*  
 hear-PASS-NFUT-3PL  
 ‘The whatsitsnames, the voices of whatsitsnames, of people were heard.’  
 (G. K. Lapuko, Tura, 2008)
- (8) *umno: aŋi-wa*                    *bagdakə-wə*            *aŋi-∅-m*  
 once whatsitsname-ACC wild.reindeer-ACC whatsitsname-NFUT-1SG  
 ‘I once did that thing to [killed] a whatsitsname, a wild reindeer.’ (S. M. Andreyeva, Strelka-Chunya, 2007)

### 2.1.2 Restrictions on the target word

As (9), (10), and (11) show, *aŋi* can substitute for both nouns (including proper nouns) and verbs.

- (9) *həwəki: hələ aŋi-l-duk*                    *sʲita-l-duk*            *o-dʲa-fki:*                    *bi-sʲə*  
 god INTJ whatsitsname-PL-ABL clay-PL-ABL make-IPFV-PHAB be-PANT  
*bəjə-l-bə*  
 person-PL-ACC  
 ‘God was making people out of whatsitsname, out of clay.’ (V. Kh. Yoldogir, Chiringda, 2007)
- (10) *nuŋartin=tə aŋi-tki:*                    *huru-tʃo:-tin*            *tar moskwa-tki:*  
 3PL=FOC whatsitsname-ALL go.away-PST-3PL that Moscow-ALL  
*du:-la:-wər=tə*  
 house-LOC.ALL-RFL.PL=FOC  
 ‘They went to whatsitsname, to Moscow, home.’ (G. K. Lapuko, Tura, 2008)
- (11) *tʃaŋit tar tʃaŋit-pa tarə aŋi-wa:t*  
 bandit that bandit-ACC that.ACC whatsitsname-IMPER.1PL.INCL  
*tʃok-na:-ya:t*  
 kill-PRGRN-IMPER.1PL.INCL  
 ‘Let us do that thing, let us go and kill that bandit (=bear).’ (S. M. Andreyeva, Strelka-Chunya, 2007)

In (12), it replaces an adjective: the speaker could not come up with the Evenki word and switched to Russian.

- (12) *aməgən=ta on aŋə skolskij*  
 saddle=FOC how whatsitsname slipperiness.R  
 ‘The saddle is how, whatsitsname, slippery.’ (I. K. Uvachan, Tutonchany, 2008)

There are no examples of *aŋi* replacing a numeral, a quantifier, or a postposition in our corpus or in the IEA RAS corpus.

In (13), *aŋi* may be considered to be replacing an adverb *duga* ‘in summer’. It is the only example of that kind in our corpus.

- (13) *hulaki:l koŋnomo-l aŋi duga o duga*  
 fox-PL black-PL whatsitsname in.summer INTJ in.summer  
*aŋi-wki:-l*  
 whatsitsname-PHAB-PL  
 ‘Black foxes whatsitsname, in summer, oh, in summer they usually do that thing.’ (L. V. Mikhaylova, Tura, 2008)

In (14), *aŋi* has the same affixes as the personal pronoun following it (note that the 3rd person pronoun form in Evenki has a possessive affix historically, which behaves just like a normal possessive suffix in nominal forms). However, it would be strange for a placeholder to replace a personal pronoun. Perhaps, the speaker wanted to say “When we were going past her grave...” and then said simply “When we were going past her...”. It is the only example in our corpus where the speaker uses a pronoun to “repair” the placeholder.

- (14) *tara aŋi-li:-n nuŋan-duli:-n*  
 that.ACC whatsitsname-PROL-3SG.POSS 3SG-PROL-3SG.POSS  
*ŋənə-də-wun e:kun=məl təpkə-l-də-n*  
 go-PSIM-1PL.EXCL what=INDEF shout-INCH-NFUT-3SG  
 ‘When we were going past whatsitsname, past her, something started to shout.’ (G. K. Lapuko, Tura, 2008)

### 2.1.3 Functions other than those of a placeholder

*aŋi* is sometimes used as an interjective hesitation marker as in Hayashi & Yoon (2010), when the speaker cites the direct speech of a character:

- (15) *tuy ŋikə-rə-n=da: gun-ə-n aŋi*  
 thus do-NFUT-3SG=FOC say-NFUT-3SG whatsitsname  
 ‘Having done this, (he) said: whatsitsname...’ (V. Kh. Yoldogir, Chiringda, 2007)

Sometimes, *aŋi* is used at the beginning of a new sentence (16) or at the end of a sentence (17) with seemingly no syntactic role or any actual placeholder function, being an interjection, marking hesitation and/or introducing a new topic.

- (16) *aŋe*                    *dʻur anŋapi:l uzə*                    *ŋənə-rə-∅*  
 whatsitsname two year-PL already.R go-NFUT-3PL  
 ‘Well, two years have already passed.’ (I. I. Tsurkan, Yerbogachyon, 2016)

- (17) *ŋinakin-tin əmə-hi-lɔi-sʲa*                    *aŋe*  
 dog-3PL.POSS come-INCEP-COMIT-PANT whatsitsname  
 ‘Their dog came with them, well.’ (V. Kh. Yoldogir, Chiringda, 2007)

In some of these examples, *aŋ* has a focus marker =*kə*:

- (18) *ə-kəldu*                    *ŋikagda ə-kəldu*                    *ŋi:-wə=də:*                    *aŋ=kə*  
 NEG-IMPER.2PL never.R NEG-IMPER.2PL who-ACC=FOC whatsitsname=FOC  
*abizət-tə*  
 offend.R=PNEG  
 ‘Never, well, never offend anybody.’ (T. A. Bogdanova, Potapovo, 2011)

According to Idiatov (2007: 300), who follows Bulatova & Grenoble (1999: 24), *aŋi* can be used as an interrogative word. However, such usages are lacking in our corpus.

#### 2.1.4 Mirroring the grammatical shape of the target word

The questions of this section are: whether wordforms with *aŋi* can have all possible slots filled in; and which slots are copied from the target word. I must emphasize the fact that we cannot be 100% sure that the word recalled by the speaker is actually the target word. However, it will be our assumption. First, I will look into the slots of nominal and verbal wordforms. For nominal wordforms, there are no examples of *aŋi* taking the alienable possession suffix in our corpus. However, there are no examples where the target word is then recalled and actually has the alienable possession affix, either. Other slots can also be filled in. For example, in (19), a derivational intensifier affix is used together with the case and number suffixes.

- (19) *irəktə-l-ə*                    *aŋi-ka:ku:-r-ə*                    *o-dʻa-n*  
 larch-PL-ACCIN whatsitsname-INTS-PL-ACCIN make-FUTCNT-3SG  
 ‘He will make larches, whatsitsnames...’ (S. P. Mukto, Uchami, 2014)

In our corpus, intensifiers are the only non-inflectional affixes which are used in nominal *añi* wordforms.

As regards verbs, there are no examples of the derivational slot (including intensifiers) filled in for the *añi* verbal wordforms. Furthermore, the voice slot also remains empty in the corpus examples, although there are elicited sentences where the speaker uses a wordform with a non-empty voice slot (20).

- (20) *ə-do:-tin*                      *añi-dʰə-rə*                      *isə-w-dʰə-rə=do:*  
 NEG-CVPUHP-3PL whatsitsname-IPFV-PNEG see-PASS-IPFV-PNEG=FOC  
*loku-sa-dʰa-ra=da:*  
 hang-STAT-IPFV-PNEG=FOC  
 ‘So that they will not do that thing, be seen, hang.’ (S. P. Mukto, Uchami, 2014)

Aspect and mood/tense slots are, on the contrary, often filled. In (21), *añi* has non-empty aspect and tense slots, and in (22) the aspect and the mood (imperative) slots are filled.

- (21) *patom bu*                      *luhu*                      *añi-ñnə-rə-w*  
 then.R 1PL.EXCL all.the.time whatsitsname-HAB-NFUT-1PL.EXCL  
*luhu*  
 all.the.time  
 ‘Then we would all the time do that thing.’ (I. K. Uvachan, Tutonchany, 2008)
- (22) *dʰəm-mu:-l-mi*                      *añi-ñna-kal*                      *gu:-sə:*  
 eat-DES-INCH-CVCOND whatsitsname-HAB-IMPER.2SG say-PANT  
*əri-ñ-mə-w*                      *tuge: sʰiwu-ñna-kal*  
 this-IND.POSS-ACC-1SG.POSS so lick-HAB-IMPER.2SG  
 ‘If you get hungry, he said, do that thing, lick this your <paw> so.’ (V. K. Udygir, Ekongda, “The man and the bear-relative”) (IEA RAS<sup>3</sup>)

There are examples of participial (23) and converbial (24) forms with *añi*:

- (23) *bi tar do:ldi:-Ø-m*                      *añi-dʰə-ri-l-wə*  
 1SG that hear-NFUT-1SG whatsitsname-IPFV-PSIM-PL-ACC  
*bu:ñi:-dʰə-ri-l-wə*                      *straf*                      *ñə:ləwsʰi=ko:*  
 howl-IPFV-PSIM-PL-ACC horrible.SLIP.R horrible=FOC  
 ‘I heard doing that thing, howling, [it was] horrible.’ (S. M. Andreyeva, Strelka-Chunya, 2007)

<sup>3</sup>[http://corpora.iea.ras.ru/corpora/describe\\_text.php?id=43](http://corpora.iea.ras.ru/corpora/describe_text.php?id=43)

- (24) *e:-ja=wəl*                      *e:-dʒə-nə*                      *horol-də-fki:*                      *tadu:=wər*  
 what-ACCIN=INDEF what-IPFV-CV SIM whirl-IPFV-PHAB there=RFL.PL  
*ŋa:lə-l-dʒi-ji*                      ***əŋ-dʒa-na***  
 arm-PL-INSTR-RFL whatsitsname-IPFV-CV SIM  
 ‘Doing something, he is whirling there, doing that thing with his arms.’  
 (V. N. Udygir, Ekongda, 2007)

Clitic slots can be filled in *əŋi* nominal (25) and verbal (26) wordforms.

- (25) ***əŋi-l=da:***                      *ŋi*                      *əmkə-n=də:*                      *asʲin bi-so:-n*  
 whatsitsname-PL=FOC not.R cradle-3SG.POSS=FOC NEG be-PST-3SG  
 ‘He had no whatsitsnames, no cradle.’ (S. P. Mukto, Uchami, 2014)
- (26) *tug=do: e:ku-r=wəl*                      *nun̄ar-wa-tin*                      ***əŋi-tʃa=hintʃa***  
 so=FOC what-PL=INDEF 3PL-ACC-3PL.POSS whatsitsname-PANT=PROB  
*huru-p-tʃo*  
 go.away-TR-PANT  
 ‘So something must have done that thing to them, carried them away.’ (G. K. Lapuko, Tura, 2008)

As demonstrated by previous examples, *əŋi* can take nominal or verbal suffixes, mirroring the shape of the target. (11) shows that the mirroring can be partial: the inflectional affix (-*wa:t* ‘IMPER.1PL.INCL’) is copied whereas the derivational one (-*na*: ‘PRGRN’) is not. However, there are some examples where *əŋi* is used with no suffixes at all. In (27), both strategies are followed. It is worth noting that the same speaker also uses verbal affixes with *əŋi* in other examples.

- (27) *bi nun̄anman əŋi*                      *sabira-Ø-m*                      *i*                      *kuŋakan*  
 1SG 3SG.ACC                      whatsitsname gather-NFUT-1SG and.R child  
***əŋ-du:***                      *hapoki-ka:n-tiki: rezin-tiki: resinowij-du:*  
 whatsitsnam-DAT.LOC boot-ATTEN-ALL rubber-ALL rubber-DAT.LOC  
*hisʲi-hi-ŋnə-Ø-m*  
 shove-INCEP-HAB-NFUT-1SG  
 ‘I whatsitsname, gathered it (the antenna) and put it into whatsitsname, child’s rubber boot.’ (L. D. Utukogir, Khantayskoye Ozero, 2011)

In (28), it is hard to distinguish between the placeholder and the interjective use of *əŋi*.

- (28) *ekun ta-wər gun-dʼə-rə-n aŋi lutfa-l*  
 what that-RFL.PL say-IPFV-NFUT-3SG whatsitsname Russian-PL  
*kokoldo-l-tin zə*  
 mitten-PL-3PL.POSS FOC.R  
 ‘What’s that? – he says. – (It’s) whatsitsname, Russians’ mittens.’ (L. A. Yeryomina speaking to M. D. Turskaya, Khantayskoye Ozero, 2011)

If we denote the suffix set of *aŋi* with *AS* and the suffix set of the target word with *TS*, we can theoretically consider the following cases:

1.  $AS = TS$  (the sets are equal)
2.  $AS \subseteq TS, AS \neq TS$  (AS is a strict subset of TS)
3.  $TS \subseteq AS, AS \neq TS$  (TS is a strict subset of AS)
4.  $AS \cap TS = \emptyset$  (AS and TS have nothing in common)
5.  $\text{not}(AS \subseteq TS), \text{not}(TS \subseteq AS), AS \cap TS \neq \emptyset$  (there is a non-empty intersection of suffixes in AS and TS)

Table 4 shows the distribution of these cases in our corpus for nominal and verbal forms separately.

Table 4: Suffix mirroring according to the corpus

	nominal forms		verbal forms	
1. equal sets	85	(45.2%)	51	(37.8%)
2. AS is a strict subset of TS	18	(9.6%)	19	(14.1%)
3. TS is a strict subset of AS	9	(4.8%)	6	(4.4%)
4. AS and TS have nothing in common	0		0	
5. there is a non-empty intersection of suffixes in AS and TS	0		0	
6. other cases (no target form, slips of the tongue etc.)	76	(40.4%)	59	(43.7%)
total	188	(100%)	135	(100%)

We compare the suffix sets only in case the Evenki target word was actually used. Therefore, the cases when the speaker did not actually pronounce the target word or shifted to Russian are included into “other cases”. However, even when the target word is lacking, the placeholder and interjective uses of *añi* can usually be distinguished with the help of *añi* forms and the context, such as the speaker’s explanations in Russian.

It can be seen that full mirroring occurs in most cases. The cases of partial mirroring can be explained with several reasons:

*Case 1:* The suffix which is absent from the placeholder form can be better described as derivational rather than inflectional. For example, in (29) the causative suffix in *ju:bdo:n* ‘to make go out’ lacks in the placeholder:

- (29) *to:li: dolbo: baldi:-ñahi:-w ami:-m ganno:-sa:-n*  
 then at.night be.born-CVSIM-1SG father-1SG.POSS fetch-PST-3SG  
*umuko:n atirka:nmə minə baldi:-da-raki:-w*  
 one old.woman-ACC 1SG.ACC be.born-IPFV-CVCOND-1SG  
***añi-da:-n*** *ju:-b-do:-n*  
 whatsitsname-CVPURP-3SG go.out-CAUS-CVPURP-1SG  
 ‘Then, at night, when I was born, my father went to fetch one old woman so that she would do that thing, make me go out. (A. I. Pankagir, Ekongda, 2007)’

*Case 2:* The placeholder can have intensifier and diminutive suffixes, serving the aims of emphasis (30, 31).

- (30) *itʃə-t-mi=ka tuyi añi-ka:kun tarə*  
 see-DUR-CVCOND=FOC so whatsitsname-INTS TOT.ACC  
*itʃə-t-mi=do: gun-dəño:-n fsʲigda bəjə gun-dəño:-n*  
 see-DUR-CVCOND=FOC say-FUT-3SG always.R person say-FUT-3SG  
*tar wojennij nuñan*  
 that military 3SG  
 ‘When someone sees – (he is) very whatsitsname, when someone sees, they will say... A person will always say that he is a military man.’ (G. K. Lapuko, Tura, 2008)

- (31) *a tar tuli:gido-n talu aŋi*  
 and.R that outside-SIDE-3SG.POSS birch.bark whatsitsname  
*aŋi-s'i-ka:ku:n bi-fki: tar*  
 whatsitsname-ATR-INTS be-PHAB that  
 ‘And on the outside there is usually birch bark whatsitsname, with  
 whatsitsname.’ (S. P. Mukto, Uchami, 2014)

Case 3: the meaning of the suffix which is absent from the target form is incorporated in the word stem. For example, in verbal forms the most frequently omitted suffixes are the so-called inchoative, inceptive, durative, and stative aspects (called subaspects in Bulatova & Grenoble 1999: 30). In (32) the target word does not have the inchoative suffix, whereas the placeholder has it:

- (32) *taduk aŋ nuŋan aŋi-l-da-n*  
 then whatsitsname 3SG whatsitsname-INCH-NFUT-3SG  
*himu:rga-ra-n tar faman famani-tka:n=tə*  
 become.silent-NFUT-3SG that shaman shaman-CHILD=FOC  
 ‘Then she started doing that, became silent, that shaman, little  
 shaman.’ (G. K. Lapuko, Tura, 2008)

We can suppose that the stem *himu:rga-* ‘become.silent’ already has an inchoative meaning, so it is not necessary to use the inchoative suffix. However, to prove this, a separate survey on the lexical restrictions for the stems in question should be carried out.

Finally, the target word used by the speaker may sometimes be not the target word originally intended. Thus, partial mirroring can show the speaker’s doubts, whereas the original intention cannot be retrieved.

### 2.1.5 Frequency

In our data, *aŋi* is quite frequent, occurring 350 times in a corpus of about 27,700 running words, i. e. about 12.6 times per one thousand words. This is much higher than the rates cited in Podlesskaya (2010) (5–6.7 per thousand), which may be explained by the lack of proficiency in some speakers. Actually, most speakers do not use the Evenki language in their daily life, and text generation presents difficulties for some of them, with lexical production being more challenging than following grammar rules. Many passive Evenki speakers have no trouble

declining a noun or conjugating a verb, including participial or converbial forms. However, recalling the exact lexemes demands much more effort from them. As a result, texts produced by such speakers might be grammatically correct but have nearly all meaning words replaced by placeholders.

### 2.1.6 Dialectal variation

According to the corpus, *an̄i* is used in the dialects of the Southern and Northern dialect groups: Sym, Podkamennya Tunguska, and Ilimpeya dialects. However, the word seems to be absent from the Far Eastern Tugur-Chumikan and Sakhalin dialects: it does not occur in texts, and the speakers do not recognize it in context. We have little spoken data from other Eastern dialects.

### 2.1.7 Possible source and evidence from related languages

In Idiatov (2007: 299–302), the functions of *an̄i* as both a placeholder word and an interrogative pronoun are discussed. The author also states a hypothesis about its origin, tracing it to an old genitive form of a word originally meaning ‘thing’ or, alternatively, “a fossilized genitive of the ... ‘what’ root” (which can be found in other interrogative pronouns). *an̄i* can also be found in the Udeghe language, a relative of Evenki (Nikolaeva & Tolskaya 2001: 361, 362). In Udeghe, the target words for *an̄i* can be both verbs and nouns (including proper names), and *an̄i* tends to mirror the grammatical shape of the target. Furthermore, it can function as an indefinite pronoun.

In Uilta (Orok), a Southern Tungusic language, *an̄ju* is a placeholder word (Idiatov 2007: 301, citing Cincius 1975/77: I: 45). According to our Uilta field data, its target words can be both verbs and nouns, just like in Udeghe, and it also has the mirroring feature.

## 2.2 *un̄un*

*un̄un* is a named-entity placeholder. To my knowledge, this stem has not been reported in Evenki grammars yet.

### 2.2.1 Functions as a placeholder

In the texts, *un̄un* substitutes proper nouns: names of people (33, 34) or animals in tales (35, 36), as well as geographical terms (37, 38).

- (33) *uŋun tare wot gus<sup>ʃ</sup>ə-ja aŋi-tin am*  
 whatsitsname2 that so.R Gusya-COLL whatsitsname-3PL.POSS SLIP  
*d<sup>h</sup>edufka-tin ha:-Ø-ndə kosin-mo*  
 grandfather-3PL.POSS know-NFUT-2SG Kosin-ACC  
 ‘Whatshisname, do you know, whatsitsname, the grandfather of the  
 Gusya’s family, Kosin?’ (P. K. Pankagir speaking to V. P. Khukochar,  
 Tutonchany, 2008)
- (34) *bəʃə uŋun-mə dəwit-pa ha:-Ø-ndə*  
 person whatsitsname2-ACC David-ACC know-NFUT-2SG  
 ‘Friend, do you know whatshisname, David?’ (L. F. Utukogir speaking to  
 A. D. Chempogir, Khantayskoye Ozero, 2011)
- (35) *tar huru-rə-Ø dəgi huwuli-n uŋun-dula: tarə*  
 that go.away-NFUT-3PL bird ALL-3SG.POSS whatsitsname2-LOC.ALL that  
*d<sup>h</sup>antaki-la:*  
 wolverine-LOC.ALL  
 ‘So all birds went to whatshisname, to the wolverine.’ (V. Kh. Yoldogir,  
 Chiringda, 2007)
- (36) *tar gu:-sə uŋun he:ŋa:n gu:-sə:*  
 that say-PANT whatsitsname2 burbot say-PANT  
 ‘So said whatshisname, the burbot said. (it is not clear whether *uŋun*  
 refers to the burbot or to the other character, the fox)’ (“Burbot and fox”,  
 V. T. Yoldogir, Chiringda, 2011 (IEA RAS)<sup>4</sup>)
- (37) *e: nu ər-tiki: zə uŋun-tiki: bi-nə bi-rkə-Ø*  
 INTJ INTJ this-ALL FOC whatsitsname2-ALL be-CV SIM be-PROB-3SG  
*nawerna ərə walok-tuk*  
 perhaps that Valyok-ABL  
 ‘Yes, it <the settlement discussed previously> was perhaps in the  
 direction of whatshisname, in the direction from Valyok.’ (L. A.  
 Yeryomina speaking to M. D. Turskaya, Khantayskoye Ozero, 2011)
- (38) *uŋun-duk ə aŋi-l d<sup>h</sup>a-li-n*  
 whatsitsname2-ABL INTJ whatsitsname-PL relative-PL-3SG.POSS  
*aŋi-duk gulə-l-duk əmə-rə-Ø=də:*  
 whatsitsname-ABL house-PL-ABL come-NFUT-3PL=FOC

<sup>4</sup>[http://corpora.iea.ras.ru/corpora/describe\\_text.php?id=35](http://corpora.iea.ras.ru/corpora/describe_text.php?id=35)

*isʲə-no:[-rə-∅]*

*aŋi-la:*

see-PRGRN[-NFUT-3PL] whatsitsname-LOC.ALL

‘His whatsitsname, relatives came from whatsitsname, village, came and went to see to whatsitsname.’ (G. K. Lapuko, Tura, 2008)

There is actually one example from Mutoray (Southern dialect group) where *uŋun* is probably a placeholder for a common noun meaning ‘hole in the ice’ and not a proper noun. However, it is hard to judge from the context as the speaker does not actually pronounce the word. Importantly, the narrator tells the tale in the presence of her husband, who makes comment to what she says, so this can also be regarded as a sort of a dialogue:

(39) *i tima nu bira uŋun=kə həgdi-məmə*  
and.R in.morning.SLIP INTJ.R river whatsisname2=FOC big-INTS

*i globokaj oj sunta mu:*  
and.R deep.R INTJ deep water

‘In the morning, well, the river, whatsitsname [a hole in the ice], large and deep water.’ (I. M. Yastrikova, Mutoray, 2007)

It can be seen from most of these examples that, when *uŋun* is used in dialogues, the speaker often asks the interlocutor to help recall the missing target. This brings *uŋun* into a sharp contrast with *aŋi*. With *aŋi*, the target word can usually be restored from the context, even if not pronounced. With *uŋun*, it is important to recall the exact name of a person or a place. This is perhaps the reason for its being used in dialogues with the inhabitants of the same settlement, who have the same background knowledge. We can say that *aŋi* is a placeholder for a word, whereas *uŋun* is a placeholder for the notion: *aŋi* helps make the narrative fluent acting like a joker, whereas *uŋun* brings the interlocutor’s attention to the word being missed.

Similar conclusions on the interactional use of a placeholder in Estonian have been made in Keevalik (2010).

### 2.2.2 Restrictions on the target constituent

As shown before, the target constituent is a proper noun.

### 2.2.3 Functions other than those of a placeholder

None have been found.

### 2.2.4 Mirroring the grammatical shape

*uŋun* mirrors the grammatical shape of a noun, copying case markers. Proper nouns in Evenki do not usually have alienable or inalienable possession markers. Plural number markers are theoretically possible but rare. Therefore, there is no surprise that *uŋun* has no number or possession markers in our data.

### 2.2.5 Frequency

In our data, *uŋun* is quite rare, occurring only 13 times in a corpus of about 27,700 running words. As shown above, it occurs mainly in dialogues between several Evenki speakers, and such dialogues are rare in our corpus. In the IEA RAS corpus, it only occurs 2 times in a corpus of 121,286 running words (the majority of the texts are, however, written texts), both times referring to the name of an animal in a tale.

### 2.2.6 Dialectal variation

In our corpus, *uŋun* is only found in the Ilimpeya dialect texts (Northern dialect group), and in Podkamennaya Tunguska texts (Southern dialect group). However, a speaker from Nakanno (Irkustk oblast, Yerbogachyon dialect, Northern dialect group) recalled this word being used in the past by elderly people, although she was not entirely sure. Speakers of the Tugur-Chumikan dialect (Khabarovsk krai, in the Far East of Russia, Eastern dialect group) did not accept the word.

### 2.2.7 Possible source and evidence from related languages

We cannot trace the origin of *uŋun*, and it is not mentioned in the comparative dictionary (Cincius 1975/77).

In Negidal, a close relative of Evenki, *uŋun* is used as a general purpose placeholder for both nominal and verbal stems, mirroring the target word grammar, e. g. in a text from the Negidal corpus (Pakendorf & Aralova 2017):<sup>5</sup>

(40) Negidal

*net baka-ja-βun                    uŋun-ma*

no.R find-NFUT-1PL.EXCL HESIT-ACC

‘No, we found a whatchamacallit.’ (A. V. Kazarova, Vladimirovka, 2017)

<sup>5</sup><https://elar.soas.ac.uk/Record/MPI1084918>. The original glossing of *uŋun* as HESIT is preserved.

(41) Negidal

*itce-mi hoŋte mesto-duki-n tak možno uŋun məjga-tca*  
 see-SS.COND other place.R-ABL-3SG so.R be.able.to.R HESIT think-PST  
*možno tʃto rjukzak=to minə-βə mu-duk-in*  
 be.able.to.R that.R rucksack.R=PTL.R 1SG.OBL-ACC.DEF water-ABL-3SG  
*uŋun-tca ʃaβu-tca-tca*  
 HESIT-PST take-RES-PST

‘Looking from the side one could think that it was the rucksack that was holding me up.’ (A. V. Kazarova, Vladimirovka, 2017)

In the dictionary of Even, another close relative (Robbek & Robbek 2005: 271), *uŋ* is glossed as “interjection” which has the meaning “pause”. Matić (2008) shows that it is typical for the Eastern Even dialects. Arkady Taraboukine, a native speaker of Even born in Beryozovka and living in Anyuysk, gave the following examples of how it could be used.

(42) Even

*tipiw bi bəri-ri-w uŋ-u halka-w*  
 yesterday 1SG lose-NFUT-1SG whatsitsname2-ACC hammer-ACC

‘Yesterday I lost whatsitsname, a hammer.’ (A. Taraboukine, Beryozovka, 2020)

(43) Even

*bi uŋ-di-m mərgət-tʃi-m*  
 1SG whatsitsname2-PRS-1SG think-PRS-1SG

‘I am doing that thing, thinking.’ (A. Taraboukine, Beryozovka, 2020)

Therefore, in Even, just like in Negidal, *uŋ* is used as a general purpose placeholder for both nominal and verbal stems, mirroring the grammatical features of the target word.

We have no information of the stem *uŋ(un)* being used in Southern Tungusic languages.

To sum up, the *uŋ(un)* stem can be found in Northern Tungusic languages with its function ranging from a general placeholder in Even and Negidal to a proper noun placeholder in some Evenki dialects. Interestingly, it was not found in the Tugur-Chumikan dialect (at least in elicitation experiments), otherwise quite close to the Even language both geographically and linguistically. In all these languages, *uŋ(un)* mirrors the grammatical features of the target word.

### 2.3 *e:(kun)*

*e:(kun)* is an interrogative pronoun meaning ‘what/who’. *e:(kun)* can also have a shortened stem *e:-* (Konstantinova 1964: 137), mostly in oblique forms. In Poppe (1977) as well as in Cincius (1975/77: I: 286), *-kun* is considered to be a morpheme, with *e:* being the original stem. According to Idiatov (2007: 303–308), it can refer to objects, animals and to humans but only when questioning their “kind” (for example, their belonging to a clan). The meaning is different in various dialects, with Vanavara dialect (Southern dialect group) speakers more approving of its referring to humans. Indefinite and negative pronouns are formed from the interrogative pronominal base (Bulatova & Grenoble 1999: 25). *e:-/ə-* is also the stem of the question verb ‘what to do?’

#### 2.3.1 Functions as a placeholder

*e:(kun)* serves as a placeholder for both nominal and verbal stems:

- (44) *dʉktʃa e:kun-ma-n ham-na-∅ urkə-wə-n*  
 tent what-ACC-3SG.POSS close-NFUT-3PL door-ACC-3SG.POSS  
*ham-na-∅*  
 close-NFUT-3PL

‘They close the tent’s whatsitsname, its door.’ (N. G. Yegorova, Yerbogachyon, 2016)

- (45) *ə-wki: minə ə-ra əyi-fko:n-ə*  
 NEG-PHAB 1SG.ACC what-PNEG play-CAUS-PNEG  
 ‘She did not let me do that thing, play.’ (V. I. Udygir, Kislokan, 2008)

#### 2.3.2 Restrictions on the target constituent

In the examples considered, *e:(kun)* can substitute for both nominal and verbal roots.

#### 2.3.3 Functions other than those of a placeholder

The functions of *e:(kun)* as an interrogative, indefinite or negative pronoun have already been discussed.

### 2.3.4 Mirroring the grammatical shape of the target word

The examples show that *e:(kun)* mirrors the grammatical shape, sometimes partially. Due to the scarcity of the data, I will not discuss the percentage of partial vs full mirroring. Like *əŋi*, *e:(kun)* is sometimes used as an interjective hesitation marker:

- (46) *e:kun=ka nawerna ŋinaki-r kiki-rka-l kuji:-ko:t-tʃə-nə-l*  
 what=FOC perhaps.R dog-PL bite-PROB-3PL fight-INTS-IPFV-CVSIM-PL  
 ‘Well, perhaps the dogs bit <it>, when they were fighting.’ (V. N. Saygotin, Bolshoye Sovetskoye Ozero, 2007)

An anonymous reviewer suggests that it could be a calque of Russian *что же* ‘what so’, used sometimes as an interjective hesitation marker. I think it might be difficult to prove or confute it with little data on how discourse markers are generally calqued in Evenki. However, I still think it is not so. *Chto zhe* sounds quite formal, and is not wide-spread in Russian colloquial speech. The speakers who use *e:(kun)=ka*, though bilingual in Evenki and Russian, are not exposed much to the formal Russian style. Actually, prosodically and functionally *e:(kun)=ka* more closely resembles Russian *это* *это* ‘this’ used very often as a hesitation marker, by native Evenki speakers, too, when they are speaking Russian.

Another important function of *e:(kun)* is its use when listing several objects of a kind, at the end of such enumerations, e. g.:

- (47) *muldi:-ka-r əragəri-t e:-wa=da doku-d’a-mi:=da*  
 not.be.able-NMLZ-PL at.all-ADVZ what-ACC=FOC write-IPFV-CVCOND=FOC  
*e:-d’a-mi:=da*  
 what-IPFV-CVCOND=FOC  
 ‘(They were) not able at all to write anything or do such things.’ (V. Kh. Yoldogir, Chiringda, 2007)

- (48) *umuko:-riktə əŋi tar ahi: mo:ni-n d’u-du:*  
 one-LIM whatsitsname that woman RFL-3SG.POSS tent-DAT.LOC  
*bi-də-ri tari-rikta bi-ŋki:-n sat-ti-fka:n-də-nə*  
 be-IPFV-PSIM that-LIM be-PSTITER-3SG tea-VBLZ-CAUS-IPFV-CVSIM  
*ə-də-nə*  
 what-IPFV-CVSIM  
 ‘Only one whatsitsname, that woman, who was in her own tent, only she gave tea to drink and did such things.’ (E. K. Khukochar, Tura, 2014)

- (49) *tozə ʃimŋaka:n=li e:kun=li*  
 also.R tale=Q.R what=Q.R  
 ‘Also a tale or what.’ (I. I. Tsurkan, Yerbogachyon, 2016)

In (50), both stems of *e:(kun)* are used: *e:kun* as a placeholder and *e:-* in the enumeration.

- (50) *walok-tula: tozə e:ku-r-wa oldo-ŋi-l-wa e:-l-wa*  
 Valyok-LOC.ALL also.R what-PL-ACC fish-IND.POSS-PL-ACC what-PL-ACC  
*əmə-wu-pki:-l bi-tʃo-l*  
 come-TR-PHAB-PL be-PANT-PL  
 ‘They also carried whatsitsname, fish and such to Valyok.’ (L. A. Yeryomina speaking to M. D. Turskaya, Khantayskoye Ozero, 2011)

The enumeration function of *e:kun* is close to what is described for Udeghe in Tolskaya & Tolskaya (2008). In Udeghe a repetition of the verbal form with the interrogative ‘what’ is used in the formation of open alternative questions.

### 2.3.5 Frequency

In our data, *e:kun* and *e:-* are used 32 times (out of 27,700 running words) in the function of placeholders.

### 2.3.6 Dialectal variation

*e:(kun)* as a placeholder is used in texts from the Bolshoye Sovetskoye Lake, Sovrechka, Ekongda, and Kislokan (Ilimpeya dialect, Northern group), Yerbogachyon (Yerbogachyon dialect, Northern group), Sym and Bely Yar (Sym dialect, Southern group), and Poligus (Poligus dialect, Southern group). There is an intersection between *əŋi* and *e:kun* areas, although texts from Bolshoye Sovetskoye Lake and Sovrechka lack the otherwise very frequent *əŋi*, which suggests some dialectal variation.

### 2.3.7 Possible source and evidence from related languages

*e:(kun)* can be both used as a normal question word and as a placeholder by the same speakers. When used as a placeholder or an interjective hesitation marker, the *=ka* focus particle is sometimes attached, like in (46) or in (51):

- (51) *itʃə:-rə-w*                      *e:kun-ma e:kun-ma=ka* *kiran-tʃika:n-mə*  
 see-NFUT-IPL.EXCL what-ACC what-ACC=FOC eagle-CHILD-ACC  
*toʃo-t-tʃə-ri:-wə*                      *dagda-du:*  
 sit-DUR-IPFV-PSIM-ACC pine-DAT.LOC

‘We saw *whatsitsname*, *whatsitsname*, a little eagle sitting on a pine.’ (G. P. Boyarin, Sym, 2009)

### 3 Conclusions

Evenki speakers employ various placeholders that mirror the grammatical form of the target word. These placeholders have different discourse functions: *əni* and *e:kun* are general purpose placeholders which provide speech fluency, whereas *uŋun* requires interaction from the interlocutor. There seems to be no difference between *əni* and *e:kun* when used as placeholders, although there is a hypothesis at a dialectal variation. *əni* and *e:kun* have usages other than those of a placeholder, which is typologically typical for placeholders, whereas *uŋun* is only registered as a placeholder in our materials.

*uŋun*, a placeholder with obscure etymology, has been found in western Evenki dialects, in Even and in Negidal. The westernmost and easternmost idioms have no contact nowadays, which suggests an ancient origin of *uŋun*. Interestingly, according to the considered materials, it is only in Evenki that *uŋun* has a special restriction on the target word, being a proper noun placeholder. *əni* is also quite wide-spread, as it is present in western Evenki dialects (i. e., in the Northern sub-branch of the Tungusic family) and in two languages of the Southern sub-branch: Uilta, and Udeghe. However, there is quite little data on placeholders in Tungusic languages in general. It is urgent to study discourse and, specifically, the use of placeholders in the Tungusic languages, especially given their endangered status and the decline of communication in these languages.

According to the corpus data, there are some regularities in placeholders copying intensifier affixes from the target word but not other derivational affixes, or, for example, voice slots. Nevertheless, it should be studied in elicitation experiments whether such copying is theoretically possible. The corpus data also suggests restrictions on the part of speech of the target word even for general purpose placeholders (*əni* and *e:kun*), which should also be tested with elicitation. However, direct elicitation experiments for the placeholders proved to be inefficient due to the low status of these words. A different experiment design, such as asking to fill in the gap, should be attempted. Another important lacuna is the prosodic features of the placeholders. In this paper, I do not look into prosodic

features of the placeholder verbs in great detail. It should also be studied using the available oral corpora with annotated multimedia content.

## Non-standard abbreviations

Russian words are indicated with an R. Grammatical abbreviations include:

ACCIN	indefinite accusative	PANT	anterior participle
ATR	attributive	PHAB	habitual participle
FUTCNT	immediate future	PNEG	negative participle
CVCOND	conditional converb	PRGRN	peregrinative
CVPURP	converb of purpose	POSS	possession
CVSIM	converb of simultaneous action	PSIM	participle of simultaneous action
INCEP	inceptive	PSITER	iterative past
INCH	inchoative	TR	transitivizer
IND.POSS	indirect (alienable) possession		

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