

Languages with pulmonic ingressive speech: updating and adding to the list

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Abstract

Speaking on inhalation, pulmonic ingressive speech, is well-known in Scandinavia and often believed to be unique to this part of the world. It has, however been shown (Eklund, 2002, 2007, 2008) that not only is ingressive speech not confined to the northernmost part of Europe, it is found all over the world and might be regarded as a linguistic universal, and can be placed in one of the different universal categories described by Croft (2003). In connection with the Eklund (2008) publication, a website was created, devoted to ingressive speech and phonation: <http://ingressivespeech.info>. Over the years incoming comments and reports have both offered further evidence for languages already on the list, as well as new languages with ingressives. Some of these are described in this paper.

Introduction

In the beginning of 2015, journalist Oliver Gee, working for the magazine *The Local* (<http://www.thelocal.se>), published a clip on YouTube that went viral (Gee, 2015). It made headlines in Daily Mirror (16 January 2015), with the title “Bizarre noise for ‘yes’ word in Swedish language will blow your mind”, Dagens Industri (22 January 2015) with the title “Norrländskt ord fascinerar världen”, and even in Australia, where news.com.au (16 January 2015) reported that in Swedish, instead “of a word, a quick intake of breath through pursed lips indicates the affirmative”. Other sources that covered the Gee’s interview include Huffington Post, and (according to Dagens Industri) even Fox News.

That the Swedish habit of speaking on inhalation is known, and regarded as somewhat strange, is nothing new. In fact, there are sources galore that cover this phenomenon, and that the “jo” (affirmative ‘yes’) perhaps is especially common in northern Sweden has also been discussed (e.g. Salö, 2007). However, that ingressive speech is unique to Sweden has been proven to be not exactly true, even if ingressive speech probably is an unusually frequent phenomenon in northern Europe (Eklund, 2002, 2007, 2008).

Of special interest here is that not only has the “uniqueness myth” been “debunked”, it has been discussed in *The Local*, where journalist Salomon Rogberg previously has interviewed Robert Eklund about this allegedly Swedish

phenomenon, which resulted in an article with the title “Swedes and donkeys: a language peculiarity” (*The Local*, 18 December 2012), which despite its title actually points out that ingressive speech occurs all over the world, e.g. in Canada, the Philippines and Greece, and establishes that “So is the northern vacuum cleaner unique to Sweden? Probably not.” (It seems Oliver Gee was not aware of Salomon Rogberg’s article; Personal Communication, 23 January 2015).

However, seeing how ingressive speech still can make headlines across the globe, it seemed in place to provide an “update” as to what languages employ ingressive speech, based on correspondence received through the website <http://ingressivespeech.info> over the past years.

An ingressive primer

To make a long story very short, ingressive speech has been around for thousands of years, and it was once thought that ventriloquists used ingressive speech as their “trick”, with an early mention already in 1657 by van Helmont (1657:22). The first mention of ingressive speech as a paralinguistic phenomenon, very much used the way it is used today (as a version of ‘yes’) is mentioned already in 1765 by Cranz (1765:279) when discussing the language of the Eskimo. Eklund (2008) lists around 50–60 languages where ingressive speech has been reported in the literature, although not all sources mention exactly *what* language(s) in a specific region make(s) use of ingressive speech.



Figure 1. Ingressive speech map retrieved from <http://ingressivespeech.info> on 2 May 2015.

The most interesting point, however, is that those languages are found all over the world, in languages belonging to very different language groups, so although it seems safe to establish that while the *frequency* of ingressive phonation surely is very elevated in northern Europe (e.g. the Baltic states, Finland, Scandinavia, Iceland, the Faroe Islands), the *occurrence* of ingressive speech beyond doubt is global.

In connection with Eklund (2008) a webpage was created to accompany the JIPA paper (Eklund, 2008), but the website also covers other ingressive phonation types (like cheetah purring) and provides an updated language map where ingressive speech phenomena are displayed in a graded fashion, using different colors and a legend.

This map, as it appeared on 2 May 2015, is shown in Figure 1 above.

An updated list

Over the past years, ingressivespeech.info has resulted in several emails from interested people both enquiring about ingressive speech in general, but also reporting its use in languages either already covered/mentioned in Eklund (2008) or not mentioned elsewhere.

In the following sections I will summarize some of these, either lending support languages that are already covered, or adding new languages to the list. The focus will be on "substantiated" and first-hand mentions.

Known languages/countries

Below I will list reports received on languages or regions that are already known to exhibit ingressive speech.

Canada

Timothy Cummings (P.C., 28 May 2011) confirms ingressive speech in Canada, on Prince Edward Island, and in Moncton, where at least one local is known to “ingress her ‘yes’s”.

New Zealand (English)

Timothy Cummings (P.C., 28 May 2011) reports that when he lived in New Zealand during the period 1997–2002, he heard “a handful of Kiwis ingress their ‘yes’s.” He also reports that this mostly occurred in the village of Havelock North on the North Island.

Khalkha Mongolian

Colton Wiscombe, an student in theoretical linguistics at the University of Utah, lived in Mongolia during the period 2006–2008 and confirms (P.C., 29 October 2009) that there are several words in Khalkha Mongolian that can be produced ingressively, including (but not limited to) тийм (“that”/ “yes”), үгүй (“no”) and мэдэхгүй (“I don’t know”).

New languages

In this section I list comments that describe ingressive phonation in languages that were not covered in Eklund (2008), and seem to be lacking from the academic literature.

Ethiopia and Amharic

Sharon Cottrell (P.C., 25 March 2009) reports that “ao” (meaning “yes”) was produced ingressively while she was working in Ethiopia during the period 1973–1975. When she later visited Denmark, she was “amused to find that Danes used the same sound”.

Timothy Cummings (P.C., 28 May 2011) tells me that several Ethiopians he met in 1996 “inhaled while saying the Amharic equivalent of “yes”: ‘ow’” (compare “ao” above), and that they “inhaled very noticeably”.

Ryan Johnson (P.C., 1 November 2013) reports that a waitress in an Ethiopian restaurant in Minneapolis uttered longer phrases like “you’re welcome” and “thank you” ingressively. When asked what her native language/s was/were, she mentioned Amharic, English and Swahili. Johnson was intrigued by this, given that he speaks Finnish and was consequently aware of the phenomenon, since, as he says that Finnish “allows for phrases and sentences to be inhaled without anyone really batting an eyelash”.

Further support for the occurrence of ingressive speech and phonation in Ethiopia (in both Amharic and English) comes from Robert Fultz (P.C., 16 July 2014) who informs me that while visiting Addis Ababa, he noticed that “pulmonic ingressive” phonation was used “as a kind of agreement/acknowledgement while another person was speaking”, i.e. as a back channel. Fultz further reports that speakers used ingressive phonation on the items “yeah” and “right”, while nodding at the same time, and that all the speakers he heard using ingressives were “male, educated, and probably 25–45”.

Albanian

Klaus E. Gjika (P.C., 7 April 2015) reports that there are two words for ‘yes’ in Albanian, “po” and “e” (the former seems to be the “official” one), where the latter is sometimes produced ingressively. Moreover, as Gjika writes: “there is also another affirmative, which sounds like an ingressive / ɸ /, placing your lips and tongue in a whistling position, but sucking air instead of blowing. To my understanding, this isn’t very dissimilar to how Northern Swedish dialects produce their ingressive affirmation”.

Interestingly, Gjika also reports that: “It’s noteworthy though that younger people from 30 years old and below don’t have ingressive sounds, as far as I can tell at least. Or maybe they don’t in the city I live in, Vlorë.” This is similar to what seems to be the situation in other parts of the world, e.g. Newfoundland, where ingressive speech and phonation seems to (more or less) be a thing of the past, and where recent reports, or reports of young people phonating ingressively are rare or non-existent.

Final comments

Comments on universality

As has previously been pointed out, ingressive speech is not a linguistic phenomenon which is unique to Sweden (or Norway), and Eklund (2008:283–284) assessed to what degree ingressive speech actually instead can be regarded as a universal, following definition 2 in Croft’s listing of different kinds of universals (2003:236), i.e.:

1. Linguistic phenomena that are areally widespread, and common in genetically closely related languages may be frequent and stable. Examples include front unrounded vowels.

2. Phenomena that are widespread but relatively sporadic within genetic groups may be frequent but unstable; examples include nasal vowels and definite articles.
3. Phenomena that are relatively scarce in the world's languages, but common in genetic groups in which they occur, may be stable and infrequent. Examples include vowel harmony and verb-initial word order.
4. Finally, phenomena that are both scarce and sporadic may be unstable and infrequent; examples include velar implosives and object-initial word order.

It would seem that the more we look at ingressive speech, the less “highly marked” (Clarke & Melchers, 2005:51) it seems to be.

Source reliability

It is obviously difficult to assess the reliability of the sources cited in this paper. Email correspondence from “unknown” sources without any “hard data” to back up the claims, is, of course, not the ideal foundation for any claims of scientific strength. However, the data sources referred to in this paper are not all that different from many sources cited in Eklund (2008), where several mentions are “anecdotal”, and even more are not in any way supported by sound files or other reliable material.

For example, Key's (published) comment that in Scandinavian, “the women but not the men, express agreement by articulating ‘ja’ with air drawn in” (Key, 1975, 150) is obviously incorrect. However, one can use this quote in order to illustrate how this field is replete with dubious sources, and is also characterized by urban myths, much like the viral video which was mentioned in the introduction. Having corresponded with the informants mentioned in the present paper gives me no reason to be more skeptical about their reliability than many of the sources referred to in my previous publications.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank everyone who has submitted comments to the website, whether these comments have been included in this paper or not. Several people have taken a substantial amount of both time and effort to answer my questions, and some of the descriptions have been phonetically very impressive, especially considering that most comments come from non-phoneticians. So, not listing everyone, but with no one forgotten, I would like to extend my

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