

## THE CONSTRUCTION OF A MIXED UNIT INVENTORY FOR MACEDONIAN TEXT-TO-SPEECH SYNTHESIS

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**Abstract** - The paper presents in detail the construction process of the mixed inventory unit database used for the text-to-speech (TTS) system "Speak Macedonian". Units called quasi-diphones form the basis of the system's mixed inventory. The selection of the quasi-diphone units to be recorded from the complete diphone set of Macedonian is discussed in detail and a list of the chosen diphones is included in the paper. The selection was made to provide maximum synthesized speech quality at minimum inventory size. Details have been given of the recording and the unit segmentation process. The interface between the recorded audio and the TTS system was also discussed. The presented information may be of use for the development of future databases for TTS systems both for Macedonian and for other languages.

**Key words** – TTS, unit, mixed inventory, diphone, segmentation, recording

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The three paradigms of Text-to-Speech (TTS) synthesis are articulatory, formant and concatenative synthesis, [1 - 3]. Up until the 1990's, TTS synthesizers predominately used articulatory and formant synthesis, both based on modeling the speech production process and thus both with a high development cost. Since then TTS systems became increasingly based on concatenative synthesis, which uses concatenation of prerecorded natural speech segments, also called units, to generate the requested speech output. This approach gives the synthetic speech a very natural sound while avoiding the expensive speech model development process, thus concatenative speech synthesis is extremely cost-effective and has allowed the proliferation of TTS systems across the globe.

Various unit lengths are used in concatenative synthesis, the longer the units the more natural the output speech, but the bigger the database. Most systems are based on diphones, which comprise two half-phones and the transition between them. Diphones usually number around 1000 per language and provide for reasonable speech quality. The most popular diphone based systems are AT&T's diphone based TTS system and Dutoit's MBROLA synthesizer [4, 5]. These systems are called monorepresented inventory systems because they mostly have only one recording of each unit to use for synthesis.

Modern state-of-the-art TTS system use expanded inventories with large unit databases with multiple units per phonetic content. The quality these systems relies heavily on the algorithms used for the selection of the most appropriate unit for concatenation, giving them the name unit-selection TTS systems. Famous unit-selection TTS systems are the Festival System from the University of Edinburgh and AT&T's NextGen synthesizer [6, 7].

To date two high quality systems have been developed for TTS synthesis in Macedonian: TTS-MK, a diphone based system developed at FON University, [8], and "Speak Macedonian", a mixed-length unit inventory system developed by the authors [9]. Both are monorepresented inventory systems.

The quality of the unit inventory is detrimental to the output speech quality of the TTS system, especially in

monorepresented inventory systems. Because of this the creation of the inventory i.e. the recording and segmentation of the speech audio material is crucial to the overall quality of the TTS system, [10, 11, 12, 13].

This paper presents in detail the recording and segmentation process used in the creation of the unit inventory of the system "Speak Macedonian". It is by disseminating this information that we hope to contribute to future unit inventory developments.

### 2. DIPHONES VS. QUASI-DIPHONES

Although the phone is the basic acoustic unit of speech, synthesizing speech by concatenating phones yields poor results. This is because of the great difficulty in simulating the interphone transition. The more common approach is to use a unit that includes half of each phone and the transition between them, called a diphone.

The TTS system "Speak Macedonian" uses a unique mixed-rank inventory featuring two sets of units: phones and quasi-diphones. The quasi-diphone (further written q-diphone) is a unit we created as a variation of the classic diphone concept. The q-diphone differs to the diphone in the respect that it comprises the two phones in their entirety. This allows q-diphones to be concatenated naturally with regular phones and vice versa.

When the need arises of concatenation of two succeeding q-diphones, q-diphones are easily demoted to classic diphones by trimming and can thus be concatenated. The trimming is facilitated using transition markers that give the boundary location between the two phones within each q-diphone, with the cut set to half way between the transition marker and the end to be trimmed.

The use of q-diphones decreased the necessary size of the inventory which in turn decreased the development cost of the inventory, while maintaining high-quality output.

### 3. MACEDONIAN PHONES

Macedonian is comprised of 34 basic phones, 28 of which are represented with a unique letter in the alphabet. The letters together with their IPA (International Phonetic Alphabet) equivalents are presented in Table I. Of these, five

are vowels (/a/, /ɛ/, /i/, /ɔ/ and /u/), and the rest are consonants. Grouped according to the manner of articulation the consonants are comprised of: 6 plosives (/b/, /p/, /g/, /k/, /d/, /t/), 3 approximants (/j/, /r/, /l/), 7 fricatives (/v/, /f/, /z/, /s/, /ʃ/, /x/, /h/), 6 affricates (/dʒ/, /tʃ/, /dz/, /ts/, /tʃ/, /c/) and 3 nasals (/m/, /n/, /ɲ/) [14]. The letter “л” reads /ʎ/ but also /l/ when preceding the front vowels /ɛ/ and /i/, and the approximant /j/. The letter “љ” reads /lj/. The cluster /lj/ was treated as a phone, due to its compactness and the tendency to palatize it in common speech. The phone /r/ can become syllabic /ʀ/ when enclosed by consonants, as it is in: “првиот” /pʀviɔ t/ (eng. the first), “рбер” /ʀ bɛt/ (eng. spine) etc. Finally /n/ is velarized to /ɲ/ before /k, g/, as in “банка” /baŋka/ or “англиски” /aŋgliski/, [15]. The phones /l/, /ʀ/ and /ɲ/ are coded with “w”, “q” and “n” further in the text.

TABLE I  
PHONE INVENTORY OF MACEDONIAN WITH  
CORRESPONDING IPA EQUIVALENTS

|   |     |   |          |   |     |
|---|-----|---|----------|---|-----|
| A | /a/ | И | /i/      | С | /s/ |
| Б | /b/ | Ј | /j/      | Т | /t/ |
| В | /v/ | К | /k/      | Ќ | /c/ |
| Г | /g/ | Л | /l, ʎ/   | У | /u/ |
| Д | /d/ | Љ | /lj/     | Ф | /f/ |
| Ѓ | / / | М | /m/      | Х | /x/ |
| Е | / / | Н | /n/, /ɲ/ | Ц | / / |
| Ж | / / | Њ | / /      | Ч | / / |
| З | /z/ | О | / /      | Џ | / / |
| С | / / | П | /p/      | Ш | / / |
|   |     | Р | /r/, /ʀ/ |   |     |

### 3. MACEDONIAN DIPHONES

The set of diphones found in a language is an essential starting point for developing a diphone-based TTS system for that particular language. This is highly specific to the language at hand, and calls for its thorough phonetic analysis. Such an analysis for the Macedonian language was undertaken by the authors as presented in [16]. In the analysis, a set of 707 unique diphones was extracted from a large body of text in Macedonian, that totaled more than 2,3 million words. This diphone set served as the basis for the recording of the q-diphone unit inventory used by our system.

### 3. UNIT DATABASE

#### A. Selecting the Quasi-Diphones

A selection of diphones was made from the complete set of diphones for the recording of the q-diphone set in the unit inventory. The following sets of diphones were eliminated from the final recording list:

i) diphones that began or ended with silence – 62 in total. This was directly provided by the use of q-diphones which allow using a simple fade-in/fade-out at the boundary of word instead of diphones comprising silence.

ii) diphones that ended with a voiceless plosive (/p/, /k/, /t/) or affricate (/tʃ/, /ts/, /c/) – 114 in total. These phones are always preceded by a short period of silence due to their manner of articulation, i.e. there is a short stop in the airflow through the vocal tract which generates a build up of air

pressure, that is released in a short burst to articulate the phone. This separates their waveform completely from the preceding phones, which have also little influence on their spectral content. This is because spectral coloring of a phone is largely influenced by the succeeding phone, because the vocal tract is already preparing to articulate it, termed coarticulation. The coarticulation effects of plosives on previous phones was seen as minor and disregarded. Fig. 1 shows spectral coloring for the plosive /k/ in two different phonetic contexts - /uka/ and /aku/. We can see that the coloring is influenced by the phones succeeding /k/ and not preceding. Also we can see that /k/ itself has little influence on the spectral content of its predecessors.

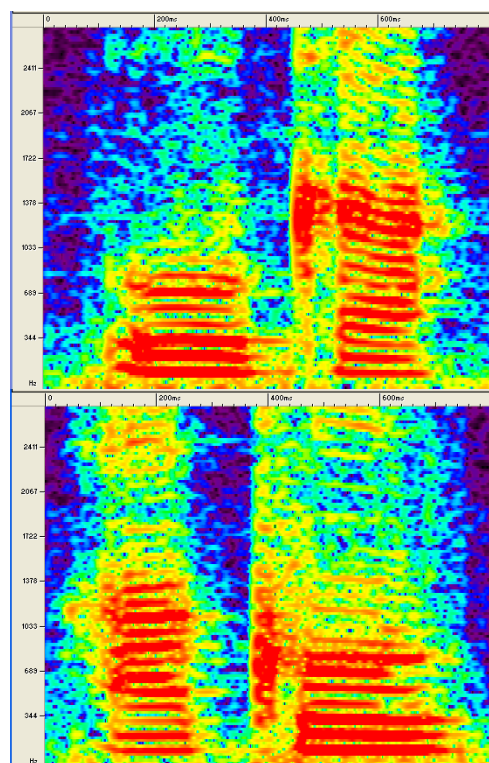


Fig. 1 – Spektral coloring of /k/ in two phonetic contexts: /uka/ (top) and /aku/ (bottom)

iii) diphones that ended with a voiced plosive (/b/, /g/, /d/), or affricate (/dʒ/, /dz/, /tʃ/) – 87 in total. In contrast to voiceless plosives and affricates these phones do not feature a complete stop in vocalization. Rather during the pressure buildup process airflow is maintained through the nasal cavity giving a nasal sound. Because of the low level of this nasal sound a smooth transition to it was seen as unnecessary to maintaining a high output speech quality. Fig. 2 illustrates the spectral behavior of /g/ in two phonetic contexts: /uga/ and /agu/. We can see that although /g/ is heavily influenced by the following phoneme it has little influence on its predecessors.

iv) diphones that comprised two identical phones – 12 in total. These can be easily obtained using the phone set.

Other q-diphone groups were also considered for elimination such as those containing fricatives, however due to coarticulation effects, they were included in the database, Fig. 3. This increased the database from the original 131 to 449 q-diphones, giving a reduction of 36% from the 707 full diphone inventory size. The recorded q-diphones are given in Table II at the end of this paper.

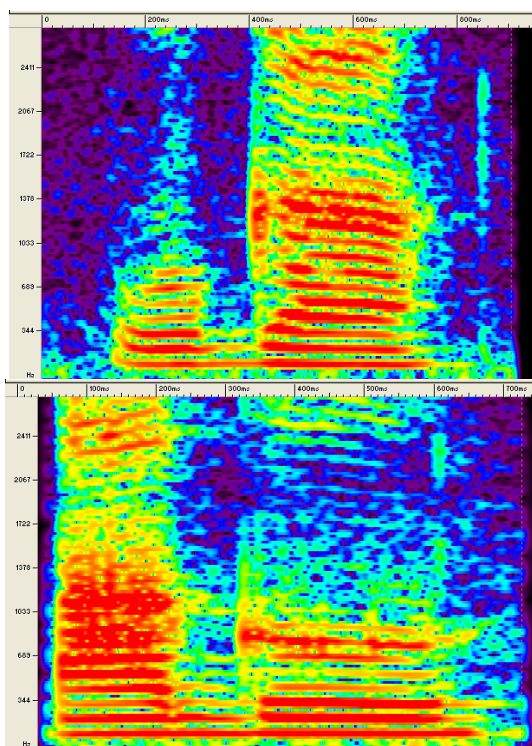


Fig. 2 – Spektral coloring of /g/ in two phonetic contexts: /uga/ (left) and /agu/ (right)

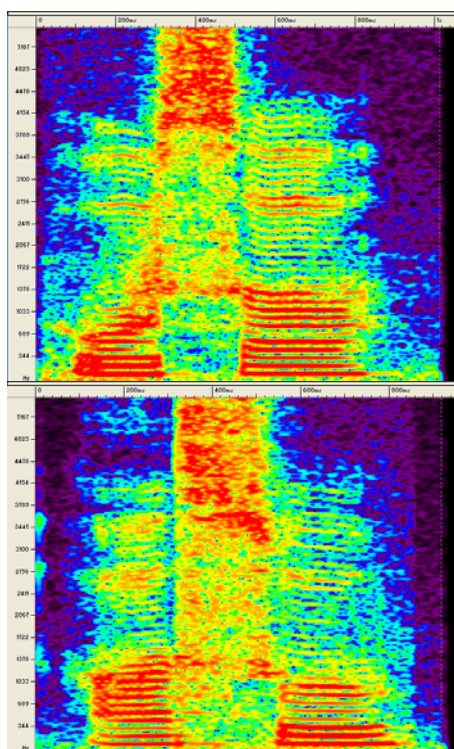


Fig. 3 – Spectral influence of /s/ on its predecessor phones can be seen in both phonetic contexts: /usa/ (left) and /asu/ (right)

## B. Recording and segmentation

The set-up used for recording the audio needed for building the database featured a standard consumer microphone connected to a Lexicon Lambda audio interface, and a personal computer with audio editing software. The microphone was positioned at a 25 cm distance from the speaker at a 30° angle from the speaker's central axis. This gave a good signal quality eliminating puffs from plosives and high levels from fricatives, while maintaining an

acceptable signal level. The digitization was done with a 44.1 kHz sampling rate and a 16-bit resolution.

The total set of q-diphones was recorded in several sessions over a 3-day period. Each of the sessions was divided into recording time and segmentation. One of the authors' voices was used for the recording process. The units were extracted from direct unit vocalization, not from continuous speech. This allowed for a much more efficient recording and inventory creation process. A short subset (up to 10) diphones were spoken and recorded at a time, each of them spoken a minimum of 2, but for some diphones up to 10 times. Special attention was put on the clear pronunciation of the diphones at hand while maintaining normal speaking rhythm. The latter was important because putting the speaking focus on the diphones increased their duration in respect to their duration in normal speech. This was seen as problematic during the segmentation of some phones, such as plosives and affricates (/k/, /t<sup>h</sup>/ etc.) which needed to be preserved in their entirety.

During pronunciation the q-diphones were enclosed in carrier syllables with no semantic meaning that were made up by the speaker during the recording process. These carrier syllables mainly comprised of two vowels added on each end of the q-diphone, except for the q-diphones that contained a vowel already. This was necessary in order to get proper amplitude levels for the diphones, which were not provided when the q-diphone was used at the beginning or the end of an utterances. Devoicing also precluded the use of some q-diphones at the end of utterances. Pitch frequency of the q-diphones was maintained by playing a reference 120 Hz drone to the speaker in the recording process.

These short recordings were then processed with a denoising algorithm based on spectral subtraction with a setting of -6 dB noise reduction at a +3 dB offset to the predicted noise level. This was necessary to eliminate the high frequency noise present in the recording due to the low quality microphone used.

After each diphone subset was recorded and denoised, the recording was analyzed and the best quality diphones were selected for segmentation. These were copied together with their surrounding phones to a master *wav* audio file where they were normalized. Normalization was based on the vowels as they are the loudest and were included in all carrier syllables. The following normalization levels were used: -8 dB for open and mid vowels (/a/, /ε/, /i/), -10 dB for closed vowels (/ɔ/, /u/), and -12 dB if the previous choices amplified the diphone of interest too much, e.g. when surrounding vowels were spoken at a lower level than usual. Some fricatives, such as /ʃ/, were normalized on their own to lower their level.

Finally, each q-diphone was marked with three markers. The first gives the start point of the first of the phones in the pair. This marker also holds the name of the q-diphone. The second marker gives the transition point between the phones, and the third the end of the q-diphone, Fig. 4. The marker data is saved in a separate *mrk* file, that is parsed by the system to extract the units from the audio file. The use of markers and a single audio file, allow easy database management. All unit corrections can now be done with simple marker repositioning, and the addition of new q-diphones is easily achieved by adding the q-diphone to the audio file and marking it. The TTS system automatically applies the changes to its inventory at run-time.



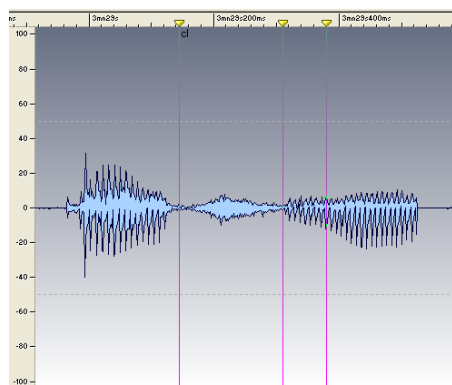


Fig. 4 - The quasi-diphone /c x/ as contained in the master audio file delimited with markers

During the marker positioning special attention was paid to the unit length. As mentioned, due to the deliberate focus on the diphones, recorded phone lengths were greater than their average lengths in normal speech. Several unit lengths were used as standard for segmentation: 100 ms for vowels, 80ms for fricatives and affricates, 70ms for approximants, and 60ms for the rest. Some units were necessarily included whole such as plosives and affricates which were segmented with an included 30 ms stop duration. The absolute unit duration in the inventory is not detrimental to the rhythm of the output speech as unit lengths are modified using the pitch-synchronous overlap-add (PSOLA) algorithm during synthesis, however, the closer they are to the length required in synthesis the better the speech output quality.

At the end representative segments for each phone were chosen from the master audio file and were copied to another audio file that would comprise the phone set. The set contains 32 phones. The phones /l/ and /ŋ/ were not included, as they appear only in the diphones already contained in the q-diphone set. Two markers were used to select the phones.

The master audio file has a total duration of 3 min 50 s with a total q-diphone unit duration of 1 min 20 s, at a 175 ms q-diphone duration average. The size of the *wav* file is 19.4 MB, of which 6.63 MB go to the q-diphones. This gives a 34% efficiency which is understandable giving that q-diphones are usually selected from parts of the phone durations and other phones are included in the file as well as periods of silence. The second *wav* file has a total duration of 8.5 s with 2.6 s of phones at 30% efficiency, averaging to 82 ms per phone. The file size is 742 KB, of which 227 KB go to the phones. This data is summarized in Table III.

The TTS system used the marker data to create the unit inventory from the audio file. The names of the segments are extracted from the start markers and stored in a name matrix. No list of q-diphones is required in the TTS system for the inventory to be built. This allows easy inventory scalability. The audio for each q-diphone is extracted from the start marker to the stop marker and stored in a cell array. The positions of the transition markers for the q-diphones are also stored for use in the synthesis algorithm. Namely if one phone is mapped to two consecutive q-diphones such as /ɔ/ and /n/ are in the q-diphone mapping of the word /makɛdɔnski/ i.e. /ma/-/kɛ/-/dɔ/-/ɔn/-/ns/-/ki/, then the q-diphones /dɔ/, /ɔ n/ and /ns/ are degraded to classic diphones at the borders where they meet by disregarding the halves of the phones at borders relative to the transition

markers. Transition markers are also used in the PSOLA algorithm to determine which part of the q-diphone is voiced and which is unvoiced, which is important for the pitch and duration modification process.

TABLE III – Q-DIPHONE AND PHONE UNIT SET DATA SUMMARY

|                  |          | unit set  |        |
|------------------|----------|-----------|--------|
|                  |          | q-diphone | phone  |
| wav total        | duration | 3min 50s  | 8.5s   |
|                  | filesize | 19.4 MB   | 742 KB |
| wav unit         | duration | 1min 20s  | 2.6s   |
|                  | filesize | 6.63 MB   | 227 KB |
| unit count       |          | 449       | 32     |
| average duration |          | 175 ms    | 82 ms  |
| peak level [dB]  |          | -5 dB     | -7 dB  |
| RMS power [dB]   | maximum  | -13 dB    | -15 dB |
|                  | minimum  | -35 dB    | -52 dB |
|                  | average  | -21 dB    | -23 dB |

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The paper presents in detail the creation process of the mixed inventory unit database used for the TTS system “Speak Macedonian”. The unit inventory is based on q-diphone units a set of which was selected from the complete diphone set of Macedonian. The criteria used in the selection process are discussed in detail and a list of the recorded q-diphones is included in the paper. The selection made provides maximum speech quality at minimum inventory size. Details have been given of the recording and the unit segmentation process. At the end, the interface between the recorded audio and the TTS system was also discussed. The presented information may be of use for the development of future databases for TTS systems both for Macedonian and for other languages.

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TABLE II  
Q-DIPHONES INCLUDED IN THE UNIT INVENTORY

|        |        |        |        |         |        |        |        |        |
|--------|--------|--------|--------|---------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| 1 qn   | 51 бо  | 101 fe | 151 зо | 201 кв  | 251 нж | 301 пф | 351 ту | 401 хн |
| 2 qw   | 52 бр  | 102 fi | 152 зр | 202 ке  | 252 нз | 302 пх | 352 тф | 402 хо |
| 3 qv   | 53 бу  | 103 fn | 153 зу | 203 ки  | 253 ни | 303 пш | 353 тх | 403 хр |
| 4 qж   | 54 вq  | 104 fo | 154 sq | 204 кл  | 254 нл | 304 pw | 354 тш | 404 ху |
| 5 qз   | 55 vw  | 105 fy | 155 sa | 205 км  | 255 но | 305 pa | 355 ка | 405 цq |
| 6 ql   | 56 ва  | 106 en | 156 sv | 206 кн  | 256 нр | 306 pv | 356 кв | 406 цw |
| 7 qљ   | 57 ве  | 107 ew | 157 se | 207 књ  | 257 нс | 307 pe | 357 ке | 407 ца |
| 8 qм   | 58 вж  | 108 ea | 158 си | 208 ко  | 258 ну | 308 рж | 358 ки | 408 цв |
| 9 qн   | 59 вз  | 109 ev | 159 sp | 209 кр  | 259 нф | 309 pz | 359 кн | 409 це |
| 10 qњ  | 60 ви  | 110 ej | 160 sy | 210 кс  | 260 нх | 310 pi | 360 ко | 410 ци |
| 11 qr  | 61 vj  | 111 ez | 161 ип | 211 ку  | 261 нш | 311 rj | 361 ку | 411 цл |
| 12 qc  | 62 вл  | 112 ei | 162 иw | 212 кш  | 262 ња | 312 pl | 362 уп | 412 цм |
| 13 qф  | 63 вљ  | 113 ej | 163 иа | 213 лп  | 263 ње | 313 pm | 363 yw | 413 цн |
| 14 qx  | 64 вm  | 114 el | 164 ив | 214 ла  | 264 њи | 314 pn | 364 ya | 414 цo |
| 15 qш  | 65 вn  | 115 el | 165 ие | 215 лв  | 265 њo | 315 po | 365 yv | 415 цp |
| 16 we  | 66 во  | 116 em | 166 иж | 216 лж  | 266 њс | 316 ps | 366 ye | 416 цy |
| 17 wi  | 67 вр  | 117 en | 167 из | 217 лз  | 267 њу | 317 py | 367 yж | 417 cq |
| 18 wj  | 68 ву  | 118 eњ | 168 иј | 218 лм  | 268 оп | 318 pf | 368 yз | 418 cw |
| 19 ap  | 69 gq  | 119 eo | 169 ил | 219 лн  | 269 ow | 319 px | 369 yi | 419 ча |
| 20 aw  | 70 gw  | 120 er | 170 им | 220 лњ  | 270 oa | 320 pw | 370 yj | 420 чв |
| 21 av  | 71 га  | 121 es | 171 ин | 221 ло  | 271 ов | 321 cq | 371 yл | 421 че |
| 22 ae  | 72 гв  | 122 ey | 172 ињ | 222 лс  | 272 oe | 322 cw | 372 ym | 422 чи |
| 23 аж  | 73 ге  | 123 ef | 173 иo | 223 лу  | 273 ож | 323 ca | 373 yn | 423 чј |
| 24 аз  | 74 гз  | 124 ex | 174 ир | 224 лф  | 274 оз | 324 cv | 374 yњ | 424 чл |
| 25 ai  | 75 ги  | 125 es | 175 ис | 225 лх  | 275 oi | 325 ce | 375 yo | 425 чm |
| 26 aj  | 76 гл  | 126 jq | 176 иу | 226 лш  | 276 oj | 326 ci | 376 yp | 426 чn |
| 27 ал  | 77 гm  | 127 jw | 177 иф | 227 лја | 277 ol | 327 cj | 377 yc | 427 чњ |
| 28 аљ  | 78 гn  | 128 ja | 178 их | 228 лји | 278 ол | 328 cl | 378 yу | 428 чо |
| 29 ам  | 79 гњ  | 129 jv | 179 иш | 229 лјo | 279 om | 329 cm | 379 yф | 429 чу |
| 30 an  | 80 го  | 130 je | 180 јw | 230 лју | 280 on | 330 ch | 380 yx | 430 ца |
| 31 ањ  | 81 гp  | 131 ji | 181 ја | 231 mq  | 281 оњ | 331 co | 381 yш | 431 цв |
| 32 ao  | 82 гу  | 132 jk | 182 јв | 232 mw  | 282 op | 332 cp | 382 fq | 432 цe |
| 33 ap  | 83 dq  | 133 jl | 183 је | 233 ma  | 283 oc | 333 cy | 383 fw | 433 ци |
| 34 ac  | 84 dw  | 134 jm | 184 јж | 234 mv  | 284 oy | 334 cf | 384 fa | 434 цm |
| 35 ay  | 85 да  | 135 jn | 185 јз | 235 me  | 285 of | 335 cx | 385 fe | 435 цo |
| 36 af  | 86 дв  | 136 jo | 186 ји | 236 mi  | 286 ox | 336 cw | 386 fi | 436 цy |
| 37 ax  | 87 де  | 137 jr | 187 јл | 237 mj  | 287 oш | 337 tq | 387 fl | 437 шw |
| 38 ash | 88 дж  | 138 ju | 188 јљ | 238 ml  | 288 pq | 338 tw | 388 fn | 438 ша |
| 39 bq  | 89 дз  | 139 zq | 189 јm | 239 mn  | 289 pw | 339 ta | 389 fo | 439 шv |
| 40 bw  | 90 ди  | 140 zw | 190 јn | 240 mњ  | 290 pa | 340 tv | 390 fp | 440 ше |
| 41 ба  | 91 dj  | 141 za | 191 jo | 241 mo  | 291 pe | 341 te | 391 fc | 441 ши |
| 42 бв  | 92 дл  | 142 zv | 192 jp | 242 mp  | 292 pi | 342 ti | 392 fy | 442 шј |
| 43 бе  | 93 дљ  | 143 ze | 193 jc | 243 ms  | 293 pj | 343 tj | 393 fw | 443 шл |
| 44 бз  | 94 dm  | 144 zj | 194 jy | 244 mu  | 294 pl | 344 tl | 394 xq | 444 шm |
| 45 би  | 95 дн  | 145 zi | 195 jф | 245 mf  | 295 pl | 345 tl | 395 xa | 445 шn |
| 46 бј  | 96 дњ  | 146 zj | 196 jx | 246 mw  | 296 pn | 346 tm | 396 xv | 446 шњ |
| 47 бл  | 97 до  | 147 zl | 197 јш | 247 nw  | 297 po | 347 tn | 397 xe | 447 шо |
| 48 бљ  | 98 др  | 148 zљ | 198 кq | 248 na  | 298 pr | 348 to | 398 xi | 448 шp |
| 49 бm  | 99 ду  | 149 zm | 199 kw | 249 nv  | 299 ps | 349 tr | 399 xl | 449 шу |
| 50 бн  | 100 fa | 150 zn | 200 ка | 250 ne  | 300 py | 350 ts | 400 xm |        |