

## YERs are Yearning for Empirical Research: A corpus approach to diachronic phonology

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The fall and vocalisation of the yers was undoubtedly one of the most important processes in the history of the Slavic languages. It has not yet, however, received an explanation that would account for all its subtleties. While in most cases the fate of the original reduced vowels is correctly predicted by Havlik's law (Havlik 1889), there exist numerous deviations from the law (Isačenko 1970, Žuravlev 1977). These, in turn, are often explained by a number of minor rules with a more narrow scope. For Russian, the most important minor rules are (leaving aside tense yers, the combination *jь* and Church Slavonic influence): vocalisation in C̣BRC and CṚBC groups; vocalisation in unpronounceable consonant cluster and analogical levelling (Galinskaja 2009: 82–94).

The latter two are tendencies rather than strict rules. As regards consonant clusters, there is no formal description of which clusters are pronounceable and which are not, nor can the rule predict what will happen to the cluster: will it be simplified, or will the yer vocalise (*полотьскъ* > *Полоцк* vs. *стѣкло* > *стекло*)? As for analogy, it is not fully understood which conditions trigger analogical levelling (*мѣсть*, *мѣсти* > *мѣсть*, *мѣсти* vs. *лѣнь*, *лѣна* > *лѣн*, *лѣна*) and which form serves as a basis for the levelling, if it occurs (*лѣстьць*, *лѣстьца* > *лѣстец*, *лѣстеца* vs. *смольньскъ*, *смольньска* > *Смоленск*, *Смоленска*).

In this paper, we investigate whether it is indeed impossible in these cases to make any further generalisations about the inherently stochastic process of language change, or whether some additional factors that influence the fall and vocalisation of the yers can be identified. Fortunately, corpus data facilitate large-scale empirical investigations also in the field of phonology. We extracted from the TOROT corpus all Old Russian lexemes that contain at least one non-final yer, and on this basis we are creating a database of approximately 3000 lexemes. To all items in the database we apply Havlik's law and the C̣BRC and CṚBC rules, and compare the predicted outcome with real outcome as attested in Contemporary Standard Russian (where possible). This approach allows us to systematically identify all cases where the basic rules do not work, and thus provides data for improving the additional minor rules. We attempt, *inter alia*, to formulate criteria of unpronounceability, and to predict whether analogical levelling is expected to take place, and if yes, which form will serve as its basis. Identification of the factors at play will advance our understanding not only of diachronic processes, but also of some peculiarities in modern Russian inflectional morphology, such as, for instance, allomorphy of some prefixes and prepositions (Endresen 2014) and paradigmatic gaps.

### References:

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