

Methodological considerations about linguistic reconstruction in space and time

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Based on a specific problem from Czech historical phonology, this paper offers methodological considerations for evaluating inner-linguistic and extra-linguistic distribution in historical reconstruction.

When discussing language histories, historical grammars traditionally tend to assume presence of a sound change when it surfaces in texts, without questioning (a) systematicity within the sound system and intersection with morphosyntax, (b) systematicity and homogeneity of distribution across the language area in time and space and in relation to register, and (c) systematicity relative to the writing system. By now, these considerations are becoming standard in treating variation, but there is less agreement about typological consistency on the level of type vs. token in language reconstruction. This issue will be elaborated here. This paper takes up the much discussed but never resolved history of the *g > ɣ > h lenition in Czech, reconsiders critically the proposed arguments, proposes a new way to approach the sparse data set, and draws concrete and principled methodological conclusions applicable to other instances of reconstruction.

The *g > ɣ > h change surfaces in the earliest Czech texts, which are themselves rather late, starting from the turn of the 13th century. Earlier writings, such as the Cosmas chronicle written in Latin in the 12th century, usually render Czech names without this lenition. Old and Middle Czech glosses in Hebrew texts written in Prague between the 10th and the 14th ct. (cf. Blácha et al. 2015) offer hardly any notation of this lenition due to their general conservative attitude and the Hebrew orthographic peculiarities. Lamprecht, Šlosar and Bauer (1984: 82f.) date this change to the late 12th century, and this has become the standard approach in the Czech lands. They analyze this change in a structuralist way as restoring the inner symmetry by making /g/ better fit the sound system as a velar fricative counterpart to palatal fricatives, and do not discuss it in terms of lenition processes, as had been insightfully done by Andersen (1969). This paper takes it from there, reviews the distribution in derivation processes in historical toponymy in Bohemia, the geographical distribution within Slavic and typological properties, and proposes a solution by which this change must have come into being significantly earlier. This timeline supports an early proposal by Šaxmatov (1915, para 62, 71), who brought together lenition (by him called ‘spirantization’) processes of /g/ in Ukrainian, Byelorussian, Southern Great Russian, Czech, Slovak, Upper Sorbian and northern Slovene, and assumed that this process must have taken place after the second palatalization in late Common Slavic. In the same line, Jakobson (1971: 621) assumed that this lenition must have occurred before the loss of the weak yers (i.e. before the end of the first millennium AD). This paper shows that toponomastic evidence relative to distribution of archeological and cultural artefacts enables a more detailed reconstruction of the time, space and possible intermediaries of this change.

This paper investigates lenition in all the medieval Czech toponymy in the context of the time depth of the associated suffixes (e.g., the -jǐ suffix not employed beyond the thirteenth century) and comparing the spread and reconstruction of these linguistic phenomena with the geographical spread, dating and characterization of Prague type ceramics and other archeological artefacts from the same area. The main research question is whether, and if so, how the distribution of the reconstructed lenition phases (i.e. (a) the primary lenition in intervocalic position or in initial syllable followed by a vowel, (b) also in the context of liquids, (c) also in the context of other sonorants, and (4) also in other environments) can be transferred onto the time scale and possibly correlated with space and time of archeological artefacts and their (socio)cultural analysis. Spatial analysis of the different kinds of distributional phenomena is performed by means of GIS. The conclusions discuss possibilities and limitations of inner- and extra-linguistic analytical transfers between space and time in historical linguistic reconstruction.

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