

On the vowel developments of the Ugric languages and the problem of Proto-Ugric

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The aim of this talk is to investigate the historical phonology of Khanty, Mansi and Hungarian and determine whether common phonological developments can be reconstructed for these three languages. Hungarian, Khanty and Mansi are usually assumed to form the Ugric branch of the Uralic (Finno-Ugric) family, but since there are very few innovations (on any level of language) shared by these three languages, the Ugric node is sometimes rejected in modern research, and it is assumed that the shared innovations are due to later mutual contacts (Salminen 2002).

Since the historical phonology of these three languages is poorly known (even one of the main supporters of Ugric unity, Honti 2017: 171 admits that the developments of Ugric historical phonology is not requested adequately; cf. also Bakró-Nagy 2013: 173–175, Aikio 2018: 78–79), it is quite difficult to assess the question of taxonomy without reworking the Ugric historical phonology.

In this presentation the alleged Proto-Ugric sound-changes suggested by the early sources like Sammallahti (1988) and WOT will be critically evaluated and they are compared to results of modern Uralic historical phonology. The evaluation is based on a more critical scrutiny of etymologies as well as on the neogrammarian principle of regular sound-change.

The current situation with Ugric phonological reconstruction can be briefly described as follows: there are few changes reconstructed for Proto-Ugric consonantism, and there is no consensus on the common vowel-developments of Hungarian, Khanty and Mansi. The existing reconstructions of Sammallahti (1988) and WOT are based on outdated etymological evidence and views of Proto-Uralic phonology that have been contested in more recent research (see especially Aikio 2012, Zhivlov 2014). Sammallahti's (1988) reconstruction is based on an outdated idea of long vowel in Proto-Uralic (Aikio 2012), and many of the changes he assumes for Proto-Ugric are obsolete because of this. The reconstruction of WOT is partially based on obsolete etymologies and on the idea of "sporadic" sound-change or "tendencies" rather than sound-laws. This approach has been wide-spread in the study of Uralic historical phonology in the 20th century, especially dominant in the study of Hungarian historical vocalism; the approach has been criticized by Zhivlov (2014).

The matter is also complicated by the problematic reconstructions of Proto-Ob-Ugric, the assumed common proto-language of Khanty and Mansi (see Tálos 1984; Helimski 1985): new reconstructions of Khanty and Mansi developments by Zhivlov (2006) have only occasionally been used in the research on the historical phonology of Hungarian.

The problems with Ugric historical phonology also mean that the etymological study of the vocabulary confined to the Ugric languages has been seriously hampered. For example, among the Ugric cognates in the UEW, the vowel-reconstructions seem to be based mostly on intuition and the vocalism of many etymologies is reconstructed on a very superficial level only (UEW often uses the general symbols for "front" *ø* or "back" *ɔ* vowels, for example Proto-Ugric **kǝłɜ́ɜ́* 'millet' > Hu *köles*, North Mansi *kolas* id. (UEW: 861), Proto-Ugric **jǝłɜ́* 'limb, joint' > Hu *íz*, East Khanty *jǝłɜ́* id. (UEW: 853), **sǝłkɜ́* 'axe for scooping' > Hu *szalu*, North Mansi *sowli*, East Khanty *suɣəl* id.); this lax practice makes it very difficult to distinguish plausible etymology from the implausible ones and to reconstruct phonological developments.

The results are not useful only for researchers of Ugric, but also shed more light for the linguistic history of Uralic family. The results have also value outside of the Uralic linguistics, as the discussion of issues of intermediary proto-languages and linguistic taxonomy in general, as well the neogrammarian principle, have wider relevance in historical linguistics.

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