

Bactrian Umlaut

Maria Carmela Benvenuto and Harald Bichlmeier

The goal of this contribution is to study the phonetically grounded diachronic phonological change known as ‘umlaut’ in Bactrian. In particular this regards the fronting (palatalizing) in Bactrian of a to i and of ā to ē before high front vowels, as well as the backing and rounding of a to o before u. Humbach (1960: 46) was among the first to note these phenomena, providing, among others, the following examples: Bactrian πιδο ‘in, on, by, with’ compared with Avestan paiti ‘at, to’; Bactrian ποσο ‘sheep’ compared with Avestan pasu- ‘sheep’.

Other studies devoted to Bactrian phonology mention the i-umlaut labelled as palatalization, but disregard the u-umlaut (Morgenstierne 1970, Sims-Williams 1988, 1989). In Gholami (2014) both phenomena are described: the i-umlaut as palatalization (Gholami 2014: 34-35) and u-umlaut as sporadic vowel assimilation (Gholami 2014: 35). What has not yet been noticed is that while cases where the front vowels arise are context-free (i.e. without conditioning environments), the backing and rounding of a to o before u is context-sensitive, since it occurs only in a labial environment: see Bactrian μολο ‘wine’ < *madu-, compared with Bactrian κασοκο ‘little’ < *kasu-ka-, Avestan kasu-.

More recently, apart from the contextual palatalization *a > i / _ya, _i, as in αγιπο ‘ineffective’ (< *a-karya-), κиво ‘canal’ (< *kanyā-), Golhami (2014: 65) has identified a second kind of palatalization triggered by the features of the adjacent coronal consonant, *a > i / _s, _z, _n, as in λιστο ‘hand’ < *dasta-, οιβινδο ‘current’ < *waz-antiya-ka-, οανινδο ‘victorious’ < *wananta-. While there is general agreement on the first phenomenon, the second kind of palatalization is a particular issue raised by Gholami that is problematic in many respects.

Indeed, upon closer examination, the second kind of palatalization is a fairly irregular phenomenon given that it is disregarded in many presumably typical contexts (see, for example, αζδο ‘knowledge’ < *azdā-; βαστο past stem of ‘to behind’ < *basta-; βανδο ‘bundle’ < *banda-; σωγανδο ‘oath’ < *saukanta-) and is applied conversely in untypical contexts: see, for example, τοχμυγο ‘family’ < *tauxma-ka-; ζαδικο, with its variant ζαδακο ‘child’, analyzed by Sims-Williams (2007: 210) as *zataka- + ‘affectionate suffix’ with preserved *k.

The aim of our paper is to re-examine Bactrian umlaut and to offer a systematic description of this sound change in a different positions.