

Neutrality in Finnic and Hungarian vowel harmony

Kiparsky and Pajusalu in their 2013 paper *Towards a typology of disharmony* give a kind of explanation on possible and impossible types of vowel harmony, based on the types of (dis)harmony explored in Finnic languages. Examples from other languages also occur sporadically in their paper: the related Eastern Khanty, the Turkic Uyghur and Turkish, but there are also references to the ATR harmony of the languages spoken in the Sub-Saharan region. However, we can not find a single reference to the related and relatively well-researched Hungarian. (Although Ringen and Vago (1998) is listed among the references, the citation does not occur in the text.)

In my presentation, I would like to examine how Hungarian vowel harmony can be fit into the typology given by Kiparsky and Pajusalu. The main problem is that Kiparsky and Pajusalu ignore vowel length, while it is crucial in Hungarian vowel harmony. Phonemes low /e/ and mid /é/ must be considered short-long pairs based on alternations (*kéz* : *kezek*, *kecske* : *kecskét* – cf. *alma* : *almát*), but their height is different. The situation is even more complicated by the fact that /e/ takes part in two kinds of alternations: /e/ ~ /a/ (with a vowel with the same height) and /e/ ~ /o/ ~ /ö/ (with vowels with different height). It seems to be an easy explanation to propose the presence of the phoneme /ë/ in the last case (the pronunciation of which does not differ in the normative language, but differs in most of the dialects). Moreover, long mid /é/ is in alternation with long low /á/. The situation is the same in dialects with /ë/, too, and low long /ē/ occurs only in some exceptional dialects (and not instead of /é/).

In Hungarian harmony, /i/ and /í/ behave like neutral vowels. In suffixes, they do not alternate (or take part in a very special alternation *-i/-ja*). If they occur in a monosyllabic stem, they are often followed by the velar variant of the suffix (*isznak*, but *visznek*; *hídon*, but *ízen* etc.), but if a monomorphemic stem contains two of these vowels, it is always the palatal variant of the suffix that is attached. If a velar vowel is followed by one /i/ in the stem, /i/ is always transparent (*makival*, **makivel*), but if it is followed by two of them, they can be both transparent or opaque (*alibival* ~ *alibivel*). In suffixes, /é/ can be alternating or non-alternating. If there is /é/ in a monosyllabic stem, it almost always takes the palatal variant of alternating suffixes, but there are exceptions (*célok*). In suffixes, /e/ almost always alternates, and stems containing an /e/ are generally followed by the palatal variant of the suffix. However, there is one example in which the velar variant follows two /e/-s: *dereka*, but cf. *derékban* etc.), and sometimes loaned stems with /e/ are followed by velar variants (*csekkol*, *Svejcban*).

The examples above suggest that in Finnic languages the vowels participating in harmony and neutral vowels can be separated much more strictly than in Hungarian. However, there are also counterexamples, ignored by Kiparsky and Pajusalu. While in Hungarian labial palatal vowels are always followed by the palatal variants of alternating suffixes (*amatőrnek*, **amatőrnak*), in Finnic (or, at least, in Finnish) even these vowels can behave as if they were neutral – or, more exactly, transparent (*amatöörilla* ~ *amatöörillä*). Of course, stems with both palatal labial vowels and velar vowels are very untypical for both languages.