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A New Balticism in Old Novgorod?

A reevaluation of the historical phonology of the old North Russian (ONR) dialect was spurred by the discovery of forms in the birchbark letters in which velars seem to have been unaffected by at least the second regressive palatalization of velars and possibly the progressive palatalization as well (Krys'ko 1998, Vermeer 2000, Zaliznjak 2004). Three major approaches emerged with regard to the question of how to interpret this evidence. The first approach, exemplified by the work of Zaliznjak, sought to interpret the evidence essentially according to its face value, concluding that the ONR dialect did not undergo the second regressive palatalization and may or may not have undergone the progressive palatalization (Zaliznjak 1981, 1991, 2004). The second approach, exemplified by scholars such as Sjöberg, has been to argue that the ONR dialect did undergo all the palatalizations, but that a secondary series of sound changes took place to convert */c/ back to /k/ (Birnbau 1991:195-197). A third approach offered by Vermeer has been to suggest that the ONR dialects resisted the monophthongization of diphthongs due to the substrate influence of Balto-Finnic (Vermeer 2000). I will show that the second and third approaches are untenable and present a new explanation of the data.

I will argue that it is possible to analyze the unpalatalized velars in the ONR dialect as Balticisms resulting from a period of Slavic-Baltic bilingualism during the spread of the ONR dialect northward. Other phenomena in the ONR dialect area, such as the presence of /kl/, /gl/ for *tl, *dl clusters, have already been analyzed as being due to Baltic influence, which makes the proposed analysis more plausible (Andersen 1996: 45). First, I will show that this analysis is compatible with Baltic phonotactics (Zinkievičius 1998:98-101). Then I will argue that this analysis is consistent with our knowledge of the Slavic migrations and the evolution of the Baltic-Slavic dialect continuum, given the evidence of long-term transitional Baltic-Slavic bilingualism (Nichols 1997, Andersen 1996, Levin 2003). I will also explore the nature of salience in phonological contact and suggest that, properly applied in this analysis, phonological salience might help explain the puzzling discrepancy in the ONR dialect between the effects of the second regressive palatalization and the progressive palatalization (Auer et al. 1998, Anderson 2002, Kenstowicz and Suchato 2006).

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