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The Collapse of Palatal-Velar Harmony from Jurchen to
Manchu

1. *Interpretations of Tunguz Vowel Harmony by Earlier Scholars*

1.1. Nicholas Poppe

Vowel harmony in the Tunguz languages is said to be complicated as seen in the following statement:

“Tungus has very strict rules of vowel harmony but it is very different from Turkic harmony. Tungus does not have the opposition of back versus front vowels. Instead, some back vowels are followed by certain back or even front vowels but never by certain other back vowels.”¹

The vowels *u* and *i* are neutral, Poppe notes, because of the sound changes **ō > u*, **ü > i*, and **ī > i*, in addition to another change *ya > ē*.

1.2. Vera I. Cincius

Vowel harmony in Evenki, a northern Tunguz language, is summarized, according to Cincius, as follows.²

Vowels in Preceding Syllables	Vowels in Subsequent Syllables			
	Low Vowels		High Vowels	
	Short	Long	Short	Long
a	a	ā	} i,u	} ī,ū
ā	ə	ā		
ē	a	ā		
o	o	ō		
w	a	ā		
ə	ə	ē		
ē	ə	ē		

¹ Nicholas Poppe, *Introduction to Altaic Linguistics*, Wiesbaden 1965:185.

² V. I. Cincius, *Sravnitel'naja fonetika tunguso-man'čžurskih yazykov*, Leningrad 1949:122.

Vowels in Preceding Syllables	Vowels in Subsequent Syllables			
	Low Vowels		High Vowels	
	Short	Long	Short	Long
H	{ a ə	ā ē	} i, u	} ī, ū
i i, ī				
g	{ a ə	a ē		
h u, ū				

The vowel ə or ē may be expected when following ē, but actually a or ā follows ē, because of the sound changes ē < *ai and ē < *ia; the vowel ə, not a, follows ā, because of the sound change a > ə; a and ə may follow i and u, because both i and u are neutral (derived diachronically from back and front vowels).

Cincius points out that vowel harmony seen throughout the Tunguz languages is “a and o in opposition to ə”.

1.3. V. A. Avrorin

The vowels of Goldi, or Nanai, a Tunguz language in the lower course of the Amur River, may be divided in vowel harmony, according to Avrorin, into two classes, i.e. the low vowels a, o and ɪ versus the high vowels ə, u and i (but ɪ and i are not differentiated in the orthography).³

2. The Shift of Vowel Harmony from Jurchen to Manchu

2.0. Vowel Harmony in Korean

Korean may provide us with a hint in solving problems regarding the nature of the vowel harmonies in Tunguz languages. Modern Korean preserves only the vowel harmony of -a/-ɔ, the verbal suffix forming continuative converbs, which is commonly said to be the opposition of low versus high vowels, but this is not exact since it is due to the sound change e > ɔ. Early Middle Korean had a strict rule of vowel harmony in the opposition of back versus front vowels, viz. palatal-velar harmony. Thus⁴,

³ V. A. Avrorin, *Grammatika nanajskogoazyka*, t. I, Moskva-Leningrad 1959:40.

⁴ The sound values of the Middle Korean vowels here follow Wan-jin Kim's reconstructions. Wan-jin Kim, *Kugō umun ch'aegye ūi yōn'gu* [A Study of the Phonetic System of Korean], Seoul 1971.

Front	e	ö	ü	i
Back	a	o	u	

The vowel harmony has, nonetheless, collapsed because of the sound changes, $e > \text{ɔ}$, $o > a/u$, $\ddot{o} > u$, $u > o$, and $\ddot{u} > u$. It is, in fact, difficult to believe in the existence of such vowel harmony as the opposition of low versus high vowels.

2.1. Opposition of *a* and *e* in Jurchen and Manchu

Jurchen suffixes containing the back vowel *a* are appended to the stems of back vocalism and those containing the front vowel *e* to the stems of front vocalism.

E.g.,

-ha (89)⁵/*-he* (496): perfective participle suffix

-hai (250)/*-hei* (255): durative converb suffix

-ra (652)/*-re* (582): prospective participle suffix

-la- (196)/*-le-* (313): denominal verbal suffix

These pairs of Jurchen suffixes were not only still preserved in Manchu, but, in addition, another variant containing the rounded vowel *o* appeared in each pair of them. As a result, the suffixes cited above became *-hal/-hel/-ho*, *-hail/-heil/-hoi*, *-ral/-rel/-ro*, and *-la-/le-/lo-*, respectively, in Manchu.

2.2. The Collapse of Palatal-Velar Harmony in Manchu

In Manchu the labial harmony that did not exist in Jurchen began to occur in such suffixes as cited above – just as in the Mongolian and Turkic languages during the mediaeval period⁶ – while the pairs of palatal-velar harmony that existed in Jurchen disappeared in certain suffixes.

E.g.,

-mai (355)/*-mei* (179): non-perfective converb suffix

*-*ba* (𐰆)⁷/*-be* (34): accusative case suffix

The Manchu reflex of the former Jurchen suffix, forming non-perfective converbs, is *-me* and that of the latter suffix, denoting the accusative case, is *-be*, both losing the back vocalism counterparts.

⁵ The numerals provided here are character numbers as explained in Gisaburo N. Kiyose, *A Study of the Jurchen Language and Script*, Kyoto 1977:61-94.

⁶ Vid. Gisaburo N. Kiyose, *Japanese Linguistics and Altaic Linguistics*, Tokyo 1991:207.

3. Conclusion

In Jurchen of the Chin period (1115-1234) the dative-locative case suffix was *-do* (704)/-**dö* (𐰘)⁷ and the causative-passive verbal suffix was *-bu-* (476)/-**bü-* (𐰚)⁷, which were strictly ruled by palatal-velar harmony.⁸ In the Ming period (1368-1644), however, the former was *-do* only and the latter *-bu-* only, having lost their front vocalism counterparts since the sound changes *dö* > *do* and *bü* > *bu* had already occurred.⁹ Likewise, since the sound value of the vowel *e* in Jurchen was the mid-front [e] which formed stems and suffixes of front vocalism and later changed to the mid-central vowel, that is, schwa [ə], the opposition of front versus back, namely, palatal-velar harmony came to be lost in some suffixes such as *-me* and *-be* in Manchu.

Other than *-me* and *-be* mentioned above, there are some other suffixes such as *-de* denoting the dative-locative case and *-deri* the prolative case, which have lost vowel harmony. On the other hand, there are also some other suffixes than those cited earlier, which still preserve the *a/e* opposition. This means that classical Manchu was in the transition stage of losing palatal-velar harmony, because of the sound change Jur. [e] > Ma. [ə].

⁷ These characters are not numbered *ibidem* as they appear only in inscriptions, not listed in the *Hua-i i-yü*, but are discussed *ibid.*, p. 55. Thus, the Jurchen characters are given in the parentheses here.

⁸ Vid. Kiyose, *A Study of the Jurchen Language and Script*, pp. 42 and 55.

⁹ Vid. *ibid.* p. 41.