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UNNATURAL CLASSES IN MORPHOLOGICAL CHANGE¹

In this note I question a long-standing truism of Russian historical morphology, attempting to account for its persistence. The facts are these: the default endings of the genitive plural of 1st declension masculine nouns, *-ov* and *-ey*, come originally from the u-stems and i-stems, respectively, and were borrowed by the much more numerous o-/jo-stems. In handbooks on historical morphology the ultimate distribution of these two endings is invariably attributed to the softness or hardness of the stem-final consonant: if the consonant was soft, the i-stem ending *-ey* was taken, if hard, the u-stem ending *-ov* was taken. The basis for this split will of course have been the fact that i-stems all ended in soft consonants and u-stems in hard consonants. This originally phonological distribution has been maintained in spite of the later hardening of some originally soft consonants; thus *u* and *ж* still trigger the soft stem ending (e.g. *малышей*, *ножей*), though they are now phonologically hard.

However, there are two consonants whose behavior runs counter to this generalization, namely *ц* and *ж*, which unexpectedly take the hard-stem ending *-ov* (e.g. *отцов*, *краёв*). *Ц*, like *u* and *ж*, was originally soft but is now hard, so one should expect it to trigger the soft-stem ending too. *Ж* for its part is the soft consonant *par excellence*, so the fact that it

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triggers the hard-stem ending is even more striking. Most handbooks, to the extent that they attempt to provide a historical explanation, follow the same tack, treating them as two discrete exceptions: (i) the rule for the distribution of *-oβ* and *-eŭ* was established when *ʏ* had already become hard but *uu* and *ʝc* were still soft; (ii) there is some sort of euphonic constraint against sequences of *j* in endings. Typical instances of this account can be found in Kiparsky (1963-67), Markov (1974), Šaxmatov (1957 – but going back at least to 1910/11), Xaburgaev (1990); the first explanation alone can be found in, among others, Gorškova and Xaburgaev (1997) and Obnorskij (1931).

Yet neither explanation is terribly satisfactory. The relative chronology assumed for the depalatalization of *ʏ*, *uu* and *ʝc* is exactly the opposite of that which must otherwise be assumed to account for the change of *e* → *o* before *uu* and *ʝc* versus the absence of this change before *ʏ* (Durnovo 1924: 176). At best difficulty is explained away by reference to southern dialects where the contrary chronology indeed prevailed (Markov 1974: 90-91, Šaxmatov 1957: 357),² but the relevance of these particular dialects for the development of standard Russian remains undemonstrated. Further, the fact that stems in *-ʏ* exhibit the same “anomalous” behavior in Polish as well argues against any explanation based on

² Kiparsky (1963-67) offers both chronologies without seeming to notice their incompatibility: in volume II of his *Russische historische Grammatik* he uses the distribution of genitive plural endings as evidence that *c* hardened before *š* and *ž* did, and states (volume II: 50-51) “This fact is an important confirmation of the chronology of the hardening of these consonants that we sketched out in volume I” [translation mine MB]. However, the chronology given in volume I (p. 114) is the standard one used to account for the *e* → *o* change, namely *š* and *ž* hardening before *c* did.

parochial facts of Russian dialects.³ As for the putative morphophonological constraint against sequences of *j*, it is purely ad hoc, and hard to reconcile with the fact that such sequences are perfectly acceptable elsewhere in nominal declension, namely in the feminine genitive-dative (-instrumental) singular of possessive pronouns, e.g. *моей*.

However, there is another, much more straightforward account. Bulaxovskij (1937: 98-99) writes:

С первого взгляда представляется странным, что именно основы, оканчивающиеся на *ц*, которое отвердело позже, чем *ж*, *ш*, усвоили окончание *о*-основы, тогда как основы с конечными *ж*, *ш* подвергались влиянию мягкого склонения [...] По-видимому, причина различия здесь в узости, конкретности пути влияния *ь*-основ на *-jo* (*-je*) основы. Среди *ь*-основ были слова на *-шь*, *-жь*, которым могло уподобиться склонение *jo*-осной вроде *ножь*, *сторожь*, но не было основ на *-ц*. Слова с таким окончанием в *jo* *о*-основах оказывались, таким образом, «выталкиваемыми» в сферу влияния других близких им основ -- основ

³ The Polish situation differs from Russian in three points (Schenker 1973:393-94): (i) many nouns which, as expected, take the soft-stem ending *-i/-y*, may optionally take the hard-stem ending *-ów* as well, which is in keeping with the notion that this is the default ending (see below), e.g. *desczy/desczów* 'rain'; (ii) four nouns in *-c* or *-dz* take *-y* instead of the expected *-ów*; note that one of them, *mesiac* 'month', has a correspondence in Russian: the word *mesjac* has for much its history displayed the same deviation (Obnorskij 1931: 180); (iii) virile nouns that take the ending *-owie* in the nominative plural take the ending *-ów*, regardless of the stem-final consonant, e.g. *mężów* 'men'. But these deviations do not obscure the fact that nouns *-c* and *-j* for the most part pattern with the hard stems. At least one Lemko Ukrainian dialect

на -о [...] Сказанное относится и к словам типа: край -- краёв [...] Ъ-основ с окончанием -ъ (й), как известно, в древнейшую пору не было.

That is, the peculiarities in the distribution of *-ov* and *-ej* were present from the very outset. Although Bulaxovskij describes this phenomenon first in terms of the opposition of soft versus hard consonants, only then to qualify it somewhat, there is in fact no reason to make this generalization in the first place. True, *i*-stems ended in soft consonants and *u*-stems in hard consonants, but these features played no independent role. The analogical extension of the *i*-stem ending took place on a consonant-by-consonant basis: stems which ended in consonants which matched those found in the *i*-stems (in all features, including but not limited to softness) took the *i*-stem ending, all others took the *u*-stem ending. The “exceptions” are only exceptions because the principles of distribution have been incorrectly set down. But Bulaxovskij’s account seems to have fallen on deaf ears, even in spite of four subsequent reprintings. The standard account remains that the distribution of the genitive plural endings was phonologically based -- with exceptions. Why?

Perhaps it is because the phonological generalization is so tempting. But for two consonants this phenomenon can be described in terms of natural phonological classes -- classes which have otherwise played an undisputedly important role in the development of Slavic morphology. Surely one would not want to set aside such a generalization in favor of an account which relied on a class whose members simply had to be listed? But

shows a similar pattern, with *-ov* and *-ej* distributed as in Russian but with *-ov* always as a second option for nouns taking *-ej* (Tokarski 1964: 98-99).

the spread of the u-stem and i-stem endings was a morphological development, and is in no way answerable to phonological naturalness. The various stem terminations found within the i-stems are, morphologically speaking, a perfectly coherent set, defined by inflectional class and not by phonological class. The presumed next logical step, to make the phonological generalization and extend *-eŭ* to stems ending in *any* soft consonant, was simply not made, apart from some dialects (Obnorskij 1931: 178-179). An interesting question which I will not attempt to resolve here is why it was the i-stems which were used to set the parameters, with the u-stem ending applied blindly as a default; suffice to say that, apart from Čakavian, in all Slavic languages where the u-stem and i-stem endings have been in competition, it is the u-stem ending which is clearly the default one.⁴

Indeed, the insistence on defining the original change in terms of phonological classes is all the more curious because the contemporary distribution is, of course, wholly conventional and does not correspond to any natural phonological class. But if morphological phenomena can be defined in non-phonological terms now, they certainly could have been a thousand years ago too.

⁴ Likewise, in the history of Russian one finds overextension of *-oŭ* (compared to its present distribution), but never of *-eŭ*.

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