

Some thoughts on the Altaic Question, with special reference to Harmony, the Comparative Method, Sprachbunds, and Second Language Acquisition

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Abstract

It is widely known that almost all of the Altaic languages possess vowel (or consonant) harmony systems; this fact has (problematically, as we shall see) been used as one of the primary justifications for the Altaic languages forming a genetic unity. In this talk I discuss a number of theoretical problems raised by the phenomenon of vowel harmony in the Altaic languages, focusing on the following:

1. Did the proto-system involve vocalic [back], consonantal [back], or [atr]?
2. Is the wide distribution of harmony systems in Altaic the result of areal diffusion, or genetic inheritance?
3. Can languages borrow rules?

Concerning the first point, Svantesson 1985, 2004 and van der Hulst and Smith 1987 propose that Proto-Altaic had vocalic [back] harmony, and the [atr] systems of Mongolic and Tungusic developed from this. I present a number of phonetic and phonological arguments for why the opposite must be true: Proto-Altaic had [atr] harmony, and the Turkic family innovated in converting this into [back] harmony. Perhaps the strongest argument comes from the voicing of obstruents before originally [+atr] vowels in the Southwest/Oghuz branch of the Turkic family, which receives a simple explanation if the voicing rule applied before the conversion of vocalic [atr] oppositions to [back] oppositions, but makes no sense if Turkic simply preserves an original system of [back] oppositions. Assuming an original [atr] system also enables us to make sense of the otherwise unmotivated transparency effects in Mongolic harmony systems.

Concerning the second point above, I consider the objection to the Altaic Hypothesis that the features shared by the Altaic languages are common typological properties (vowel harmony, head-finality, lack of word-initial r, etc.) rather than the shared non-trivial innovations demanded by subgrouping theory or the systematic phonological correspondences required by the comparative method. I argue that though these points are quite valid, they do not undermine the legitimacy and importance of studying harmony across the Altaic languages. Whether the harmony systems in the Altaic languages result from genetic inheritance (the Stammbaumtheorie) or from areal diffusion (the Wellentheorie, which may be supported by the facts involved in the development of vowel harmony in Mongolian adduced by Svantesson 2004, and comparison of the lexical stocks of Turkic, Mongolic, and Tungusic), we are still dealing with transmission of phonological subsystems (cf. Thomason and Kaufman 1988) that can be studied by phonologists using the same set of tools, provided that areal diffusion of this sort actually involves transmission of rules rather than individual words or nebulous unspecified pressures. On this point it is important to bear in mind that areal diffusion typically occurs under conditions of bilingualism and/or second language acquisition (SLA), which enables us to see that diffusion of phonological rules is just another case of the best-known SLA phenomenon, transfer of rules from one's first language to one's second language.