

The Old Hungarian h-metathesis

András Cser^{1,2}, Beatrix Oszkó^{1,3}, Zsuzsa Várnai¹

¹Hungarian Research Centre for Linguistics, Budapest; ²Pázmány Péter Catholic University, Budapest; ³University of Novi Sad

Metathesis has been traditionally presented as an irregular, exceptional type of sound change outside of the category of Neogrammarian sound laws (Paul 1880/1995: 63–66, Murray 2015: 28). Since about the turn of the millennium, however, metathesis has been in the focus of renewed attention (Hume 2001, 2004, Blevins & Garrett 1998, 2004) and a number of regular or near-regular cases have been presented and analysed in the literature.

In this talk we take a close look at h-metathesis, an Old Hungarian sound change mentioned and documented but never properly analysed in the literature previously (Deme 1943, Bárczi 1958, E. Abaffy 2005, Katona 2020). In this process a [h] (possibly with variants [x] or [ç]) metathesized with a consonant if it was in coda position, see (1).

(1) Pre-OHu *[juh(u)num] > OHu [jonhom] 'my heart/soul' (following syncope)

OHu [εhɲejt] > [εɲhi:t] 'mitigate'

OHu [rohman] > Middle Hungarian [romha:ɲ] place name

Middle High German *kel(e)ch* → OHu [kελeh] → MiHu [kεheλ]

'chalice'

Middle High German *trech(t)* → OHu [tεreh] → MiHu [tεher] 'load, burden'

Claims that have been made in the literature previously can be summed up as follows: (i) metathesis with an immediately following nasal was systematic; (ii) metathesis with other consonants was erratic; (iii) [h] (or [x]) remained after [o], as in (MoHu) [potrox] 'belly, abdomen', [dox] 'musty smell' (Bárczi 1958: 167 for (i, ii), E. Abaffy 2005: 106–128 for (i–iii)).

We claim that of these three claims, (ii) and (iii) are erroneous and (i) is incomplete: metathesis for coda [h] was, in fact, systematic in all cases that had been left intact by other changes (e.g. [xt] > [çt] > [jt] within OHu). There is only one substantive constraint on h-metathesis, never previously described, but possibly of cross-linguistic relevance: word-initial position is an illicit target due to its extreme salience, hence no metathesis in e.g. [me:h] 'womb' or [roh] 'red or black colour'; in such a position the [h] could be lost. There is further-more an important variable which concerns the ratio of occurrence of different forms within a lexeme's paradigm. Partly for semantic and syntactic reasons many of the relevant words were practically always affixed with a vowel-initial suffix, hence the [h] was never or almost never in coda position (e.g. [me:h] 'womb' is almost always attested as [me:he(d)] 'her (your) womb', [potrox] is only attested in OHu in the adjectival form [potroxof] 'glutton', as opposed to 'chalice', frequently attested in the inessive form [kελehben] 'in the chalice').

Our other claim is that OHu h-metathesis should not be analysed in the context of other metathesis changes which are indeed erratic (e.g.

[søktʃɛ] > [søtkɛ] 'grasshopper') but in the context of the changes affecting the natural class of nonsibilant fricatives [h x ç ʒ v f] previously or simultaneously. A set of changes spanning the entire OHu period consistently erased all coda nonsibilant fricatives mainly through vocalization (except for [f], which was restricted to onset to begin with), e.g. [eɣ] > [eɥ] > [ø:] or [Vçt] > [Vjt] > [V:t]. The systematic metathesis of [h] was one of these changes restricting the remaining nonsibilant fricatives to onset position. It appears to have taken longer to implement than the other changes (first attestation in Early OHu, but several only in MiHu), which may be explained by reference to the non-gradual nature of the change and the different trajectory of its lexical diffusion as consequence (cf. Philips 2015). The data and the analysis we present may thus well be relevant to the broader issue of gradualness and lexical diffusion in general.