

Sonority thresholds and phonological change: Presonorant Lengthening in BCMS revisited

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Bosnian/Croatian/Montenegrin/Serbian (BCMS) displays a vowel lengthening process known as Presonorant Lengthening (PSL; Zec 1988, Kapović 2015), whereby underlyingly short vowels lengthen before a coda sonorant (1). Traditionally, PSL has been viewed as compensatory lengthening (CL) driven by the loss of a Late Common Slavic (LCS) yer vowel in the following syllable (cf. 2) (Timberlake 1983_{a,b}, Kavitskaya 2002). This paper challenges the CL analysis of PSL and ascribes the process to a large-scale prosodic change in early BCMS that affected the language's sonority thresholds.

- (1) a. lo.vac 'hunter.NOM.SG' b. bu.ga.rin 'male Bulgarian' c. lo.nac 'pot.NOM.SG'
 lo:v.ci 'hunter.NOM.PL' bu.ga:r.ka 'female Bulgarian' lo:n.ca 'pot.GEN.SG'
- (2) a. *lovīca > lo:vca (CL in CVRC) b. *kosīca > kosca 'mower' (no CL in CVCC)

Crucial evidence against the CL analysis comes from the relative chronology of PSL and the so-called Yat Change, which eliminated the early BCMS vowel *ě, known as yat. The reflex of *ě in the Jekavian dialects of BCMS is quantity-sensitive: monosyllabic *je* for short *ě (cf. *pěsma 'song' → Jek. *pjesma*) and disyllabic *ije* for long *ě (cf. *mlě:ko 'milk' → Jek. *mlijeko*). Unlike inherited long vowels, originally short *ě that underwent PSL was treated as *short* for the purpose of the Yat Change, displaying the monosyllabic rather than disyllabic reflex (cf. 3). This indicates that PSL took place *after* the Yat Change, which in turn occurred in the 14th century (Belić 1958), suggesting that there was at least a 300 years gap between yer vowel loss, assumed to have taken place in the disintegrating phase of LCS (11th century), and PSL.

- (3) a. LCS *sěnika 'shadow' → Jek. BCMS sje:nka, not **sijenka
 b. LCS *viděvūši 'see.PTCP.PST.F.NOM.SG' → Jek. BCMS vidje:vši, not **vidijevši

Per Kavitskaya (2002: §4.4), yer deletion-induced CL's sensitivity to the sonority profile of the intervening consonant (cf. 2) falls out from the fact that following the loss of yers, target vowels were phonetically longer before sonorants than before obstruents prior to the phonologization of this length. The time gap between yer loss and PSL calls into question the viability of Kavitskaya's phonologization scenario: how likely is it for non-contrastive length, which is invisible to the sound change and regular phonological rules of the language, to be carefully passed from generation to generation for 3 centuries (≈12 generations)? I conclude that CL through vowel loss was likely not the historical source of vowel length before a tautosyllabic sonorant in BCMS (cf. Scheer 2017:124 for analogous observations vis-à-vis similar lengthening phenomena in West Slavic). However, the loss of yers indirectly set the stage for PSL in that it introduced hitherto impermissible closed syllables. I propose that in early BCMS, coda sonorants were weight-contributing, while coda obstruents were not, i.e. the set of moraic segments included vowels and sonorants (as in e.g. Tiv and Lithuanian; Zec 1995). However, at some

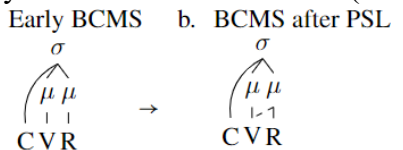


Figure 1. The mora-sharing account of PSL

point after the Yat Change, a prosodic change occurred which raised the sonority threshold such that the set of moraic segments was restricted to vowels, to the exclusion of sonorants. In response to this prosodic innovation, coda sonorants shared their moras with the nucleus vowel to avoid an illicit mora-heading sonorant, resulting in PSL (as depicted in Figure 1). I draw a correlation between the prosodic change proposed herein and several sound changes that reshaped the vowel inventory of BCMS between the late 13th and early 15th centuries. In this period, there was a tendency to eliminate low-sonority moraic segments, which manifests itself in the following changes: *ə → a, *l → u, and the change of *l in the coda to o. I assume that this tendency provided the driving force for the elimination of moraic sonorants from BCMS. Thus, I posit a complex chain of events where a series of regular, Neogrammarian-style sound changes created a push for an abstract grammar change à la Kiparsky (1965, 1988), which is ultimately responsible for PSL.

The study sheds new light on the role of sonority and prosodic structure in phonological change and provides new insights into the mechanism of prosodic change.