

The emergence of the geminate affricate *cc in Proto-Finnic as a problem of historical phonology

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The geminate affricate *cc (voiceless alveolar affricate) is commonly reconstructed to the consonant system of Proto-Finnic, the protolanguage ancestral to the Finnic languages such as Estonian, Finnish, Veps and Karelian (see e.g., Kallio 2007: 230). However, as noted in previous research already (e.g. Häkkinen 1992), it is unclear how this geminate emerged: while geminate stops were possible already in the preceding Proto-Uralic, and some other geminates (such as *ll and *nn) emerged in Proto-Finnic through assimilatory processes from consonant clusters, *cc does not seem to regularly go back to any Proto-Uralic phoneme sequence and therefore its background is debated. It has been assumed that *cc regularly corresponds to *ćć in the related Saamic branch of the Uralic family, and *ćć has been reconstructed as the Proto-Finno-Saamic predecessor of Finnic *cc and Saami *ćć (e.g., Sammallahti 1988). While there was a general tendency of depalatalization of consonant phonemes in Proto-Finnic (Kallio 2007: 233), the idea to derive *cc from Finno-Saamic *ćć is, nevertheless, problematic given the small number of etymologies manifesting the relationship Proto-Finnic *cc ~ Proto-Saami *ćć. Furthermore, the postulation of a Finno-Saamic node in the Uralic family has generally fallen out of favor, making the whole reconstruction of Proto-Finno-Saamic unlikely (Salminen 2002). It has also been assumed that *cc was acquired through the substitution of the clusters *t̥i and *d̥i in Baltic and Germanic loanwords (such as Proto-Baltic *med̥ia- ‘forest’ → Early Proto-Finnic (?) *meććä > Proto-Finnic *meccä id.; Koivulehto 1999), but the number of loan etymologies supporting this idea is likewise scarce. Recently, Jakob (2023: 120, footnote 3) has suggested that Finnic *cc emerged through a regular fortition of Pre-Proto-Finnic sequence *jć. This idea seems convincing as such, but it explains only part of the instances of *cc.

In this presentation, I will revisit the different suggestions concerning the origin of Proto-Finnic *cc with the aim to shed more light on the emergence of this phoneme sequence and to also highlight the methodological problems involved in the previous discussions. I intend for this presentation to serve as a case study of historical phonology that touches several relevant aspects of the field. One such issue is the relationship between historical phonology and etymology: when the phonological system of a protolanguage is reconstructed, the etymological evidence that is available is obviously of crucial importance, and in instances where the phoneme (or a sequence of phonemes in question) appears in few lexical items only, the situation becomes rather challenging, even in the case of a thoroughly studied language or branch, such as Finnic. The role of borrowing and sound substitution in the emergence of new phonemes (or phoneme sequences) is related to the previous issue, as the phonology of prehistoric loanwords is often open to various interpretations. The debated background of *cc in Proto-Finnic also makes this issue relevant for the larger problem of regularity and irregularity of sound change.