

The Middle Hungarian raising and merger of long front vowels: phonological change vs. paradigmatic effects

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Late Old Hungarian (15th century) possessed three front unrounded vowels in the long series, [ɛ:] [e:] and [i:] (e.g. [hɛ:t] '7', [se:p] 'beautiful' and [i:r] 'write'). In a fortuitous parallel to Early Modern English developments, these vowels underwent a series of raising changes and mergers in the Middle Hungarian period (16–18th centuries) (E. Abaffy 2005, Bárczi 1958, Kaposi 2019). Depending on dialect, these changes could result in the reduction of the subsystem either via the merger of the higher two vowels ([he:t], [si:p], [i:r]) or via the merger of the lower two vowels ([hɛ:t], [se:p], [i:r]); however, the three-way contrast could also be maintained following raising via different types of diphthongisations and/or via the shortening of original [i:] ([he:t]/[heit], [si:p]/[siep], [ir]) (Papp 1963, Juhász 2009, 2011). Conventional wisdom holds that these changes constitute a push-chain starting from the low vowel (Juhász 2009), a view we shall challenge. This paper looks at important but understudied sources from the early 1500's to determine (1) the exact phonological conditioning factors of the raising process and (2) how the raising and the mergers interacted with, and were constrained by, the morphology in obscuring, maintaining or creating paradigmatic contrasts.

The two main dialect clusters that this presentation looks at are referred to as East Hungarian and West Hungarian. One of the relevant differences between the two concerns the treatment of word-final original [e:]. In WestHu this was raised to [i:], similarly to non-final [e:]. In EastHu, by contrast, final [e:] was left unraised, as opposed to raised non-final [e:]'s. (Later diphthongisations slightly changed the realisations but not the systemic relations.) Given the extensive use of suffixation, the treatment of final vowels naturally interfered with the expression of morphological contrasts. We claim — and demonstrate — that hitherto unexplained patterns of raising vs. the absence of raising as expected per regular sound change can be accounted for if one assumes the following: If a contrast is expressed in the morphological system, the lower threshold of the phonological distance between forms expressing that contrast inversely correlates with the morphological distance between the forms. In other words, forms closer to each other in the morphological system need a larger phonological difference than forms which are paradigmatically more distant, and this requirement can influence the course of regular sound change.

The empirical goal of the paper is to present a fine-grained analysis of the conditions that governed the changes and to challenge the conventional wisdom on the push chain vs. pull chain issue (cf. Juhász 2009, 2011, N. Fodor 2012). The conceptual goal of the paper is to offer insight into how the pressures of a rather complex suffix-based morphological system can fine-tune phonological change.