

The life cycle of Slavic mid vowel alternations

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This paper presents an amphichronic analysis of patterns, pervasive across the Slavic languages, that involve alternations between mid front and non-front vowels after a palatalized consonant. These patterns show similarities across the family, but are not inherited from Common Slavic (Andersen 1978). I use the framework of the life cycle of phonological processes (Bermúdez-Otero 2015) to explicate the similarities and differences, and demonstrate how several distinct predictions of the framework are borne out by the comparative material. Further, I argue that the Slavic material is consistent with a prediction of the framework that has not yet been examined in detail: namely, I demonstrate that rule scattering can account for how ‘the same’ phonological pattern is repeatedly re-innovated over time.

Many Slavic languages show alternations between mid front vowels such as [e] and back [o] or low [a] after a palatalized consonant, driven by the right-hand context: the front vowel usually occurs before a palatalized consonant and/or a front vowel in the next syllable. In most varieties they are not surface-true, and can both over- and underapply.

		Polish		Russian		Bulgarian
Alternating	v ^j atr	‘wind.NOM’	jołkə	‘fir.DIM’	bjał	‘white.SG.M’
	v ^j etʂɛ	‘wind.LOC’	jełi	‘fir’	beli	‘white.PL’
Non-alternating	p ^j ana	‘foam.NOM’	bjeł	‘white.M.SG’	xjiljada	‘thousand.SG’
	p ^j ane	‘foam.LOC’	bjełiŋlikij	‘white.DIM’	xjiljadi	‘thousand.PL’

The changes as usually reconstructed are superficially similar (raising $*\varepsilon > \varepsilon$ in front contexts, backing $*\varepsilon > \jmath/a$ in back contexts) but differ in conditioning: $*\varepsilon > \jmath$ applied before all non-palatalized consonants in Russian but only anterior coronals in Polish (Janczulewicz 2021). These restrictions can recur more widely: thus, anterior coronals exert a backing effect in other circumstances in Russian and Belarusian (Wexler 1977), Czech (Bělič 1972), or Čakavian (Jakubinskij 1924).

Building on the premise that phonological change is constrained by language-specific phonetic variability, I argue that similarities in the *stabilization* of the mid vowel alternations are down to language-specific *phonologizations* of vowel-consonant interactions in Common Slavic. Following Iskarous & Kavitskaya (2018), some languages maintain them as phonetic rules coexisting with their stabilized congeners (*rule scattering*). These persistent phonetic rules can undergo repeated stabilization. I suggest that this mechanism underpins *rule generalization* (Ramsammy 2015), where a stabilized change spreads to more contexts. I explore this prediction in detail and show that a pan-Slavic perspective allows us to reconstruct the progression of mid vowel alternations along the rule generalization cline even when this conditioning is opaque once the change has been completed. I suggest that such ‘hidden’ cases of rule generalization are likely to be much more common than usually appreciated.

Finally, I examine the interaction of mid vowel alternations with morphosyntactic structure. Today, these patterns show the hallmarks of the ‘stem-level syndrome’ (Kaisse & McMahon 2011). This implies that they must have undergone successive stages of *domain narrowing*, which I show to be correct. Evidence for the postlexical stage is preserved in the variable reflexes of non-inflectable items (Belarusian *jašče* ‘still’, *užo* ‘already’ vs. Russian *ješčo*, *uže*), attributed to stochastic lexicalization of sandhi variants. Evidence for domain narrowing from the word to the stem level is seen in the gradual extension of overapplication, clearly documented in the historical and dialectal record: Polish *jezioro* ‘lake’, locative older (transparent) *jezierze* but present-day (opaque) *jeziorze* (with maintenance of the transparent pattern in stem-level derivatives: *pojezierze* ‘lakeland’). By contrast, the more progressive Ukrainian completely restricts the alternation to stem-level derivation.