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Workshop: Abstractness in Phonology

Jón Símon Markússon (jsm2@hi.is), University of Iceland

Does *u*-umlaut have anything to do with *u*? The case against phonological interpretation of *a/ö*-alternations in Icelandic and Old Norse.

Abstract

There is no doubt that the assimilatory process of *u*-umlaut occurred in Proto-Nordic. The effect of this sound change was the rounding of a susceptible vowel in a syllable immediately preceding the unstressed /u/ of an ending or suffix, cf. OIcel. *vörður* < Pr.-N. \**warður*. The legacy of *u*-umlaut is a semi-regular alternation between unrounded and rounded vowels in Icelandic (especially *a* ~ *o* (> *ö*)) in the position before unstressed /u/ (with certain exceptions, eg. OIcel. *börn* (> MIcel. *börn*) < Pr.-N. \**barnu*).

The alternation may be called semi-regular as it applies without fail in certain morphological environments, e.g. in forms showing *a* elsewhere in the paradigm, cf. dat.pl. *dögum*, nom.sg. *dagur*; 1.p.pl.pst.ind. *kölluðum*, inf. *kalla*, 1.p.sg.pst.ind. *kallaði*, yet may or may not apply in others, e.g. in the nom.sg. of strong masculine forms such as *dagur* and *vörður*.

From the historical viewpoint, the (non-)occurrence of *ö* in *dagur* and *vörður* can be explained with reference to their respective Pr.-N. etonyms and indicate that alternations resulting from Proto-Nordic *u*-umlaut are both morphologically and historically conditioned in Icelandic.

For the last 30 years a generative analysis has dominated the discussion surrounding the nature of *u*-umlaut alternations in Icelandic. This analysis seeks to define *u*-umlaut as a productive phonological rule of Modern Icelandic; one by which unstressed *u* changes *a* into *ö* through regressive assimilation, just as Pr.-N. *u* changed *a* into *o* (although *u* and *ö* (< *o*) have both been fronted since *u*-umlaut was active in Proto-Nordic). Exceptions such as nom.sg.

*dagur* have been explained through positing synchronic derivation via rule ordering from an underlying form such as #dag+r#. The order of 'active phonological rules' stipulates that *u*-umlaut occur before *u*-insertion, thus giving rise to the surface form *dagur*. For a form like *vörður*, *ö* is said to be present in the underlying form and consequently not the result of synchronic *u*-umlaut. Such an analysis then begs the question: If the speaker first determines the underlying form from the already familiar surface form why should the surface form later be determined by the underlying form? The argument appears to be a circular one.

While proponents of generative analyses endeavour to explain such phenomena on the basis of the linguistic competence of current speakers it is clear that historical linguistic facts pertaining to *u*-umlaut have largely been ignored. It is easy to show, however, that *u*-umlaut, as it is delineated both for Proto-Nordic and Icelandic, is to be considered an unnatural assimilatory process on phonological grounds for certain periods of Icelandic. For example, while /u/ remained [+ back] until at least the 16<sup>th</sup> century, /ø/ had merged with /o/ by around 1200 and was subsequently lowered to /ö/. Those who consider *u*-umlaut active today must then explain why a phonological rule should become unnatural (i.e. back /u/ should not only round /a/ but also front it to /ö/), then become natural again (i.e. front /u/ rounds /a/ to /ö/) and but be active for the whole period. The arrival of epenthetic *u* also poses a problem for the generative analysis. At some point in time the epenthetic vowel segment merged with original /u/, and should thereby have called for the application of *u*-umlaut. This did not happen, however, and speakers continued to apply the alternations according to their distribution in Proto-Norse, i.e. \**dagar* > OIcel. *dagr* > MIcel. *dagur*, while \**warður* > OIcel. *vǫrðr* > MIcel. *vörður*; \**barnu* > OIcel. *bǫrn* > MIcel. *börn*.

This explains the regular application of *u*-umlaut alternations in borrowings, such as *kastali* ~ dat.pl. *köstulum* which imitates the alternations in e.g. adj. *spakari* ~ dat.pl.comp. all genders *spökurum*; *ōn*-stem nouns such as *Mazda* ~ obl.sg. *Mözdu*, cf. *flaska* ~ *flösku*. Other examples of morphological classes displaying distinct active alternations between *a* and *ö* in their paradigm will be presented to support the conclusion that the alternations are morphophonologically conditioned in all instances, e.g. MIcel. *dagur* ~ *dögum*, *vörður* ~ *vörðum* and *barn* ~ *börn*.