THE CONVERGENCE OF CONTACTING PHONOLOGICAL SYSTEMS: THE ALEUT DIALECT OF COPPER ISLAND

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ABSTRACT

The Aleuts of Copper Island speak a creolized version of Aleut-Russian Pidgin that formed by the end of the XIX c. The phonology of the language, as well as all other levels of its structure, formed as a result of linguistic contact and interference. The consequences of this contact can be traced in the change of phoneme system, in higher variatity of consonants, and in certain phonotactical processes in clusters.

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

The Aleut language has at present two main dialects, both being subdivisions of what was known in the XIX century as Western Aleut: Atkan dialect (ATK) and Attuan dialect (ATT), named according to the main islands where the dialects are spoken, resp., Atka and Attu (see /8, p. 49/ for details and further references).

In 1826 the administration of Russian-American Company transfered several dozens of Aleut workers that were in its service to previously uninhabited Commander Islands in order to have constant access to the Bering Island and especially Copper Island seal furs. During the 150 years that have passed since that time the newcomers have developed two different dialects: Bering Island dialect (BI) that is a conservative form of ATK, and a creolized Copper Island dialect (CI) of which ATT is considered to be the "maternal" dialect /1/, /6/, /7/.

In this paper we adhere to the hypothesis according to which certain social and historical conditions led to formation by the second half of the XIX century of a peculiar social group of Russian-speaking "creols". This social group later created "Pidgin Aleut" as a means of communication with the Aleut-speaking population of the islands. The newly created language went in course of time through creolization and subsequent relexicalization on the Aleut basis resulting in the modern version of CI (see /7/ for details and further discussion).

The most conspicuous grammatical feature of CI is its system of verbal inflexion for person, number, tense, and mood, as well as negative forms that have definite Russian origin /6/, /7/. All the rest grammatical subsystems are typically Aleut: nominal inflexion, derivation of both verbs and nouns, NP syntax, a.o.

The aim of the present paper is to outline the phonological consequences of creolization, of converging sound systems of Russian and Aleut that resulted in formation of a rather peculiar CI phonoligical system.

There are at least three points in CI phonology where we can suspect Russian interference: 1. the phoneme inventory; 2. the corruption of velar/uvular opposition; and 3. consonant clusters.

THE PHONEME INVENTORY

Professor Knut Bergsland called the absence of labial obstruents /p,b/ the most conspicuous feature of Aleut phonology, and considered it to be of diachronic character /3, p.69/. However, W.Jochelson who did his field work on Attu at the begining of the XX century, used letters b and p to mark "bilabials... pronounced with a very slight closure of the lips so that we have transient sounds between b and v, p and f" /4, p.1/; see also /5, p. 131/. K.Bergsland who transcribed Jochelson's ATT texts rendered his p and b as v /2, p.9/, i.e. he rightly treated them as two allophones of one and the same phoneme.

Unlike all other Aleut dialects, CI has both /p/ and /b/. CI /p,b/ obviously originated from ATT bilabial /v/ (corresponding to ATK /m/, /M/, /mg/, or sometimes to labiovelar /w/, cf. ATT qavya=, CI qabya=, ATK qamda= to be deep; ATT čavluḫ, CI čabluḫ, ATK čamluḫ floor; ATT kaviḫ, CI kabiḫ, ATK kamgiḫ head; ATT avčul to tell, CI apcuḫ tale (ATK aMas ask?); ATT ava=, CI aba=, ATK awa= to work, etc.

The choice between /p/ and /b/ is definitely positional: ATK /m/∽ CI /b/ before sonants, voiced fricatives or vowels, and ∽ /p/ before voiceless consonants: ATK čamluukaḫ, CI čabluukaḫ chin; ATK imdu=, CI ibyu= to roll (a stone); ATK hamraḫ, CI habraḫ sleeve; but ATK čamčxiḫ, CI čapčiḫ fishline; ATK umsuḫ, CI upsuḫ or umsuḫ tongue; ATK umta=, CI upta= to smell.

Before sonants even the voiceless ATK /M/ corresponds to CI /b/, not /p/: ATK saaMlaḫ CI saablaḫ egg; ATK čiMignuḫ, CI čibinuḫ big toe, etc.

The immediate ancestor of CI /b,p/ is evidently ATT /v/, not ATK /m/: while we have a consistent correspondence of CI /b, p/∽ ATT /v/, in ATK we have here a variety of sounds: /m, w, M/ and a cluster /mg/.

It seems highly probable that the two separate sounds appeared in CI as a result of the splitting up of /v/ that was triggered by strong Russian influence. It was quite natural for the Russian-speaking makers of CI creole to treat the bilabial fricative /v/ as bilabial stops /p/ and /b/ depending on its position.

CORRUPTION OF VELAR/UVULAR OPPOSITION

In Aleut (and Eskimo) there are two distinct interlingual (as well as morphonological) rows of correspondences: /g-k-x/ and /r-q-ḫ/ that never mix up: there is no such thing as alternations /g-r/ or /k-q/. The only dialect that breaks the rule is CI.

CI loses uvular sounds in many cases, substituting them for corresponding velars, cf. ATT (txin) irata= get frightend, ATK iratu=, CI igatu= to be afraid; ATT hiḫta=, ATK hiḫta=, CI hixta= to speak, etc. Uvular sounds in general are rather unsteady in CI: there are words that are pronounced with /ḫ/ or with /x/ alternatively by one and the same speaker, e.g. aχsa=/aḫsa= to die, a.o.

In two cases the substitution is reversed: where in ATT we have /g/, in CI we find /r/: ATT qaglaḫ, CI qarlaariḫ raven; ATT qagliḫ, CI qarliḫ shoulder.

Finally, there are even cases when the voiced fricative /g/ is pronounced as a voiced stop /g/ – a sound unknown to the Eskimo-Aleut phonology, e.g. tiŋ anagasal I hit myself with smth.; tin ačigait he learns (cf. ATK txin ačixal), etc.

We think that these facts can be best explained by direct Russian influence: the Pidgin ancestor of CI must have had a highly Russianized phonetics, and one of the first things to do was to eliminate from the Pidgin all the sounds that are not found in Russian and are thus hard to pronounce for Russian-speaking comunity, and to simplify ("to correct") the pronunciation of the rest. Consequently, the uvular sounds were forced out, the velar/uvular opposition was ruined, and later re-established itself in a corrupted form.

CONSONANT CLUSTERS

Phonotactical peculiarities of CI or, more specifically, order of consonants in typical clusters can be of two types: 1. those developed by CI during the 150 years of its independent existence – that is, independent from its "maternal" language ATT, and 2. those developed as a result of close contact with BI (=ATK). The borderline between the two types of changes is naturally rather unsteady. We shall consider cases when CI differs from both ATK and ATT as independent development and cases when CI differs from ATT but is identical with BI - as BI interference, though such a decision is of course quite arbitrary.

Let us consider changes in consonant clusters in CI compared with ATK and ATT, i.e. metatheses. Metatheses are frequent as interdialectal correspondences in Aleut; they are also found within any of the Aleut dialects. In CI metatheses are also numerous. The following classification can be suggested as regards the possible sources of metatheses. If a CI cluster differs from ATT, it means that there is a development of some kind. If CI is identical with ATT, it is the ATT "heritage". Now, if CI differs from ATT, but is identical with ATK, it may be ATK influence. Finally, if CI is different from both ATT and ATK, it must be independent development. Consider:

1. CI ≠ ATT, ATK. /yg/∽ /gy/: ATT aygags, CI agyagait, ATK aygahs to walk, to go; /sḫ/∽ /ḫs/,/xs/: ATT asxinuḫ, ATK asxinuḫ, CI axsinuḫ girl, daughter. /tx/, /tk/∽ /ḫt/: ATT atkiyaḫ, CI aḫtiyaḫ, ATK atxidaḫ cod. /gl/∽ /lg/: ATT ilga=, CI igla=, ATK ilga= to seek, look for. /rn/∽ /nr/: ATT sugarniḫ, CI sugarniḫ, ATK suganriḫ young person.

2. CI, ATK ≠ ATT. /rn/∽ /nr/: ATT hunrutaḫ warmth, CI hurnayait, ATK hurnas to be warm. /gn/∽ /ng/: ATT qingaḫ, CI qignaḫ, ATK qignaḫ fire.

3. CI, ATT ≠ ATK. /gl/∽ /lg/: ATT igluḫ, CI igluḫ, ATK ilguḫ grandson. /ks/, /xs/∽ /sx/: ATT ixsaḫ, CI iksaḫ, ATK isxaḫ place, bed.

As can be seen from the given examples, CI seems to have developed a phonotactical pattern of its own, at least as far as consonant clusters are concerned, namely, it follows a rule that places velars and uvulars before any other consonant. In all three groups of metatheses CI tends to place velars /k,x,g/ and uvulars /ḫ,r/ before sonants, glides and fricatives (and in one case before a stop). The pattern is consistent and purely CI, i.e. it is independent of ATT and ATK clusters. If ATT had the same order of consonants, CI preserves it, resisting the BI influence. If ATT had the reverse order of

consonants, CI develops its own order either independently or perhaps yielding to BI influence.

The tendency of cluster organization can also be treated as a result of language contact; most probably, its source can be found in the Russian influence which is very strong in CI. CI seems to be the only Aleut dialect that developed so consistent a tendency of cluster shape.

BI INFLUENCE

There are several cases when changes in CI compared to ATT probably took place as a result of direct BI borrowing, cf.: ATT /ŋ/ ∽ CI /n/: ATT haaŋuḣ, CI haanuḣ, ATK haanuḣ salmon; ATT /v/ ∽ CI /m/ (not the usual /b/): ATT kiv=, CI kim=, ATK kim= to descend, to walk down.

CONCLUSION

The phonology of CI differs noticeably from that of other Aleut dialects. These differences are most likely due to the specific position of CI among other Aleut dialects as a creolized Pidgin Aleut. Many changes that occured in CI compared to maternal ATT can be explained by Russian interference. Other changes may have occured as a result of permanent contact with BI. The possibility of independent development should be also taken into consideration.

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