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From the intimate life of Turkic sonorant consonants

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The paper discusses the roles of Turkic sonorant consonants in contact with certain obstruents, arguing against an alleged sound law according to which Old Turkic obstruents became voiceless after stem-final *n*, *l*, *r*, as a result of dissimilation. It is assumed that original dental, velar and affricate stops had become weak fricatives in intervocalic position. With the loss of Proto-Turkic short final stem-vowels, the fricatives came into direct contact with the sonorants and assimilated to them, turning into weak stops. The weak cluster *nj* emerged in the same way as *nd*, *ld*, *rg*, etc.

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Introduction

The present paper discusses the roles of the Turkic sonorant consonants *n*, *l*, *r* in direct contact with certain obstruents. The sonorants are peculiar segments in that they do not occur as onsets in indigenous Turkic words. They are, however, quite free to occur in other positions, where they tend to cause considerable morphophonemic alternations.

In an early monograph (Johanson 1979), I argued against an alleged sound law, according to which East Old Turkic obstruents become voiceless after stem-final *n*, *l*, *r* as a result of dissimilation. In the case of the dental-alveolar obstruents, it was claimed that a fricative *ð* had emerged in intervocalic position. With the loss of Proto-Turkic short final stem-vowels, which started after sonorant consonants, the fricative turned into a weak stop *d*.

Vowel syncopation

According to the ‘short vowel syncopation’ hypothesis, old stem forms such as **konā-* ‘to settle down’ and **sayā-* ‘to milk’ turned into shapes such as *kon-* and *say-*. The hypothesis was originally launched by Altaicists, but is also widely supported by non-Altaicists. The unsyncopated forms are ascribed by the former to an Altaic proto-language, and by the latter to Proto-Turkic. In both cases, the unsyncopated forms are thought to have left traces in Mongolic stems such as *kona-* and *saya-*, either as genuine cognates or as loans from Turkic. Thus, Mongolic *saya-* may, as Róna-Tas assumes, go back to a Proto-Turkic **sagā-* (1998: 72). According

to Erdal, there is no evidence for such claims (2004: 60). Nonetheless, there are still reasons to stick to the syncopation hypothesis, which exemplifies well-known linguistic processes and possesses strong explanatory force (cf. Johanson 1975: 134).

Fricatives > weak stops

My hypothesis implies that a Proto-Turkic *d* had become a fricative δ in the intervocalic position after short stem-final vowels. The position after *l*, *n*, *r* was articulatorily convenient for vowel syncopation. The high degree of sonority of *l*, *n*, *r* allowed a pronunciation without a vocalic element. The fricative δ came into direct contact with the following sonorant and assimilated to it, developing into a weak stop *d*.

This was a change that eliminated an uncomfortable sequence of two continuants. It implies a shift of the manner of articulation. Admittedly, the mere change of a continuant δ —with an incomplete closure of the vocal tract—to a stop *d* under the influence of a preceding continuant could be interpreted as dissimilation. But the change $\delta > d$ also implies an assimilation to the preceding sonorant with respect to the place of articulation. The consonants δ and *d* were probably not completely homorganic. The place of articulation of δ was more front, i.e. apico-dental. The place of articulation of *d* was somewhat more retracted, i.e. alveolar. The sonorants *n* and *l* were articulated in the same position as *d*, with the tip of the tongue touching the upper gum at the same place of articulation.

This situation can be compared to similar assimilations in languages such as Old Icelandic and Spanish, where the stop *d*, and not the approximant δ , occurs after *n* and *l*. It is interesting to note that there are also reverse cases of assimilation, causing alveolars to shift to dentals. Thus English *n* normally has an alveolar place of articulation, but in words such as <tenth>, it tends to be pronounced as a dental because the following sound θ is dental.

East Old Turkic *r* partly follows the behavior of *n* and *l*. After *r* we find *d* but also δ , e.g. *Bar- δ i* ‘X went’, *yer- δ ä* ~ *yer-dä* ‘at the place’. This is understandable only if the East Old Turkic *r* was an alveolar liquid. Judging from the overwhelming testimony of modern Turkic languages, *r* was an apico-alveolar vibrant, i.e. an alveolar trill [r] or an alveolar tap or flap [ɾ]. According to Erdal’s quite astonishing classification, East Old Turkic *r* is, however, a velar (2004: 62). The alveolar fricative *z* partly shows a similar behavior (Johanson 1994).

It is important to stress that I did not claim that the Proto-Turkic dental was originally a stop and remained as such after the syncopation. Róna-Tas (1991: 61–62) has correctly remarked that if an original stop *d* had not been fricativized after stem-final *l*, *n*, *r*, this would mean that no short final vowels had existed here, which would have to be explained. But this was not my line of argumentation. I assume that an original *d* had become δ between vowels and that this δ turned into *d* when the short stem-final vowel disappeared.

Notations

The East Old Turkic runiform signs **ᠲ** <t¹> and **ᠬ** <t²> denote *t* (a voiceless tense stop), *D* (a partly voiceless tense stop), and *d* (a voiced tense stop). They mark stops in contrast to fricatives, but they do not distinguish voiced and unvoiced realizations. The stop *d* that occurred after *n*, *l*, *r* is written with the runiform signs <t¹> and <t²>.

The East Old Turkic fricative *ḍ* that had emerged in intervocalic position is spelled with the signs **ᠳ** <d¹> and **ᠳ** <d²>. It is written with a special character for *ḍ* in the Northern Brāhmī script, and with the Arabic letter *ḍ* <ḍa:l> (rather than *ḍ* <da:l>) in Maḥmūd al-Kāšġarī's Karakhanid materials.

The two-consonant conjunct characters ("ligatures") **ᠨᠳ** <nd> and **ᠯᠳ** <ld> were created to denote the clusters *nd* and *ld*. The cluster *lt* is never written with the conjunct <ld>, e.g. **ᠯᠲᠢ** <lt'i> *altı* 'six'. These facts cannot be accidental. The Brāhmī two-consonant conjunct <nd> is employed to represent *nd*. There is no reason to assume that it represents *nt* and was chosen instead of <n> + <t>, because the latter looked too similar to <t> + <t>. Its use is clearly analogous to the use of <nd> in the runiform script. The Manichean script uses <nun> + <daleth> in an analogous way. Karakhanid written in Arabic script employs *ḍ* <da:l> (rather than *ḍ* <ḍa:l>) for this weak stop. The runiform script does not possess a conjunct character for *rd*.

Velars

The distribution of East Old Turkic weak velars is similar, typical of a stage where the short stem-final vowels are disappearing. Sonorant consonants trigger left-to-right assimilations that turn the weak fricative velars *ɣ* and *ɣ* into the weak velar stops *ḡ* and *g*.

The vowel syncopation process led to developments such as *kölgä* 'shadow' < **köl°yā*, *qarğa* 'crow' < **kar°ya*, *tamğa* 'mark, brand, stamp' < **tam°ya*, and *čäkürgä* 'locust' < **čäkür°yā*. The development also occurred in markers such as the postterminal adjective suffix {-GIn}, e.g. *tur-ḡun* 'calm' < **tur°-ḡun*. The runiform signs **ᠬ** <k¹> and **ᠬ** <k²> represent the strong velar stops *k*, and *k*, but also for the weak velar stops *ḡ* and *g*. There is no diachronic reason to suppose that words of the kind cited here contained a strong velar stop and should be read as **kölkä*, **tamka*, **čäkürkä*, **turkun*, etc.

Forms such as **käs°-ḡin* 'sharp' did not undergo the assimilation in question. After the completion of the vowel syncopation process, however, another kind of assimilation led to voice reduction, e.g. **käs-Gin* 'sharp'. This is not tantamount to a development of weak velars into strong velars.

Many Turcologists still read the East Old Turkic runiform <t> and <k> signs slavishly *ad litteram*, i.e. as *t*, *k*, *k*, though the signs also stand for the weak stops *d*, *g*, *ḡ*.

Assimilations and dissimilations

Sonorant consonants take part in various assimilation and dissimilation processes serving the ease of articulation. They are rather dominant in most modern languages,

exerting considerable assimilatory influence, e.g. $n + l > nn$ as in Gagauz *gün-när* ‘days’ or $l + d > ll$ as in Turkmen *yol-loš* ‘companion’. In patterns of dissimilation, the sonorant consonants play non-dominant roles, often being eliminated or replaced, e.g. $w + l > w\delta$ as in Bashkir *taw-δar* ‘mountains’ or $l + l > ld$ as in Kazakh *köl-der* ‘lakes’, Tuvan *xol-dar* ‘hands’. Here, the two consonants have become dissimilar, one of them losing a previously shared feature. This is certainly not true of the alleged East Old Turkic dissimilation claimed in the Turcological literature.

The affricate *ǰ*

Another relevant case is the occurrence of the affricate *ǰ*. In the East Old Turkic runiform script, the strong prepalatal affricate *č* is denoted by **𐰇** ⟨č⟩ and **𐰈** ⟨č̣⟩ (with *i* as inherent vowel), e.g. *čöl* ‘desert’, *sač* ‘hair’. Many Turcologists doubt the presence of *ǰ*, the weak counterpart of *č*, as an independent sound in early Turkic. Róna-Tas excludes it as an “etymological sound” (1991: 62), though it occurs in some Soghdian loans and a few other words. According to Erdal, it is unknown whether East Old Turkic speakers pronounced *ǰ* in any context (2004: 70). It is not clear, he remarks, on what my assumption of the existence of an East Old Turkic phoneme /ǰ/ is based. In fact, although I am convinced of the existence of the affricate *ǰ*, I have not commented on its possible phonemic status.

The phonology of the prime syllable, the left-most monosyllabic element and most prominent part of the Turkic word, differs significantly from that of the rest of the word. The distinction between strong and weak obstruents is possible in the coda of prime syllables, whereas it is neutralized in subsequent parts of the word. In Oghuz languages, prime syllable codas display clear alternations between strong and weak obstruents, e.g. Turkmen *sač* ⟨saç⟩ ‘hair’ vs. {u:ǰ} ⟨uç⟩ ‘end’, Turkish *iç* ⟨iç⟩ ‘interior’ vs. {aǰ} ⟨aç⟩ ‘hungry’. The alternation mirrors original vowel quantity differences.

The traces of these distinctions have been extinguished in most Turkic languages, though they may once have occurred more widely. Clauson supposes combinations of long vowels + *lenes* for the whole pre-thirteenth century Turkic period, e.g. *a:ǰ* ‘hungry’, *a:d* ‘name’, *tü:b* ‘root’, *kö:g* ‘sky’ (1972: 17a, 32b, 434b, 708b). Sayan Turkic varieties still mirror distinctions of this kind. In final positions of polysyllabic stems, only weak obstruents occur, e.g. Turkish {kanaD} ⟨kanat⟩ ‘wing’, {ayaG} ⟨ayak⟩ ‘foot’. The fact that the obstruents mostly undergo final voice reduction does not make them strong obstruents.

Again, the East Old Turkic runiform script provides valuable information. It has a special two-consonant conjunct **𐰇𐰈** ⟨nǰ⟩ to denote the cluster *nǰ*, in which the weak affricate *ǰ* occurs after the sonorant consonant *n*. Most Turcologists have taken this conjunct to denote *nč*, though the reasons for this are not clear (e.g. Erdal 2004: 118). An argument against the existence of *nǰ* has been the belief that *lenis* obstruents such as *d* and *ǰ* do not occur in word-final position. But they certainly do; final

voice reduction does not mean that they become *fortes* (e.g. Turkish {a^a:Ĵ} <ağaç> ‘tree’).

The occurrence of *j* may have been essentially restricted to this cluster. It is always written with the conjunct character, not with two individual consonant signs. The role of *j* in the cluster denoted by the conjunct <nĵ> is analogous to the role of *d* in the cluster denoted by the conjunct <nd>. The major Orkhon Turkic inscriptions, e.g. Kül Tegin, Bilgä Kağan, and Küli Čor, provide enough reliable examples of the use of this conjunct. Examples of *nĵ* as the coda of a prime syllable include **𐰽𐰺𐰍** <y²inĵw> *yinĵü* ‘pearl’, **𐰽𐰺** <nĵa> *anĵa* ‘so’, ‘that much’, <s¹nĵ> *sanĵ-* ‘to pierce’, <b¹wnĵa> *bunĵa* ‘this much’, <y²nĵga> *yinĵgä* ‘thin’. Examples of *nĵ* in word-final position, beyond the prime syllable, include **𐰽𐰺** <r²nĵ> *äriñĵ* ‘presumably, apparently’, <t²wr²t²nĵ> *tört^onĵ* ‘fourth’, <b²is²nĵ> *be:š^onĵ* ‘fifth’, <y²it²nĵ> *yet^onĵ* ‘seventh’, <t¹wk¹znĵ> *tok^oz^onĵ* ‘ninth’, <wn¹nĵ> ‘tenth’ *on^onĵ*.

East and West Turkic evidence

For East Old Turkic we may assume the coda alternation {nĴ}, e.g. *sanĵ-ar* {sanĴar} ‘pierces, stabs’ ← *sanč-* {sanĴ} ‘to pierce, to stab’. Some modern languages display a similar weak cluster *nĵ*. Khalaj, a language exhibiting numerous archaic features, possesses forms ending in *nĵ*, e.g. *sanĵ-* ‘to bruise’ (‘to plant, to sting’; ‘eine Druckstelle verursachen’, *ti:nĵ* ‘quiet, peaceful’, *gĵinĵ-* ‘to grind’ (Doerfer 1988: 53). In the Kashghar dialect of modern Uyghur, a weak cluster *nĵ* occurs in words of the same type, e.g. *sanĵ-* ‘to pierce’, *tinĵ* ‘peaceful’. Modern Turkmen exhibits stems such as *yenĵ-* <yenj- > ‘to beat’.

The Mongolian form *kenĵe* ‘young’ corresponds to a Turkic form *känĵ*, ending in a weak affricate. The West Old Turkic loan <gyöngy> *d’önd* ‘pearl’ in Hungarian, dealt with in Róna-Tas & Berta (2011: 405–407), confirms the existence of a weak affricate. This word, of Chinese origin, was probably copied into Hungarian in a form such as **ĵinĵü*, i.e. with a weak cluster *nĵ* rather than with a strong cluster *nč*. The word has lost its final vowel (a regular inner-Hungarian development), but the important information is that the final consonant is not č, but rather the weak obstruent *j*. As noted above, the East Old Turkic form is *yinĵü*.

Yakut evidence

A decisive argument is provided by morphophonemic alternations resulting from diachronic processes in Yakut prime syllables. We find stems such as *as* ‘hair’ < **sač* and *as-* ‘to open’ < **ač-*, where the final strong affricate č has changed to *s*. The corresponding prevocalic alternant is *h*, e.g. *Ahar* ‘X opens’ < **asar* < **ačar*. A different stem *as-* goes back to **sanĵ-* ‘to pierce’. The corresponding prevocalic alternant is the palatalized nasal *ń* [n̟]. The stem {anĴ} < **sanĵ-* is realized as *ań-* before vowels and otherwise as *as-*, e.g. *Ań-a-bĵn* ‘I pierce’, *As-ta* ‘X pierced’. The coda *ń* is clearly a weak segment going back to the cluster *nĵ*. Prime syllables of the same kind, which have undergone the developments *nĵ* > *s* and *nĵV* > *ńV*, include

mus- ‘to gather’ < **muǰ-* < **munǰ-* < **bunǰ-*. A further example is the verbal stem *sīs-* ‘to beat’, where the prevocalic alternant is *ń*, e.g. *muń-a-bĩn* ‘I gather’, *sĩń-a-bĩn* ‘I beat’.

Ordinal numbers in *nǰ* show a similar morphophonemic behavior. The affricate appears beyond the prime syllable and is thus likely to be weak. Yakut *bäh-is* ‘fifth’, the ordinal number of *biäs* ‘five’ < *bä:š*, goes back to **bä:s-is* < **bä:s-inǰ* (with a long monophthong). Before vowels, forms such as *bäh-in-i* (with the 3SG possessive suffix) < **bä:s-inǰ-i* occur. *Törd-ün-ü* and *Bäh-in-i* are the Yakut names of the fourth and fifth month, August and September, respectively.

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