

Effects of vowel reduction on Russian and Belarusian inflectional morphology

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Abstract

The study investigates a series of morphological changes in Russian and Belarusian dialects provoked by homophony due to vowel reduction. The reaction to potential or actual homophony depends on the morphological category and the specific contrast involved. Either homophony is avoided by the introduction of a new non-homophonous suffix in one of the two relevant cells of the paradigm or homophony is permitted and morphological reanalysis takes place. Contrasts in number and person are supported at the cost of introducing additional allomorphy into the system. Elsewhere homophony entails reanalysis which results in more complex morphology, including partial or complete reclassification, the introduction of morphophonemic alternations, and other idiosyncratic morphological adjustments. The changes discussed are all based on the outputs of a fairly low-level phonological/phonetic process and they reveal another dimension of analogical change.

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1. Introduction

The purpose of this investigation is to show that vowel reduction, an automatic sound change not driven by phonotactic well-formedness conditions, has some far-reaching effects on the morphology of Russian and Belarusian dialects. Given that Russian and Belarusian morphology is characterized by extensive syncretism, especially in the nominal and adjectival declensions, the fact that potential or actual homophony produced by vowel reduction is tolerated in some inflectional forms but not in others is of significant interest. The specific morphological readjustments motivated by vowel reduction are different depending on the given category in which reduction takes place and on the nature of the morphosyntactic contrast involved. The study is based on data from Russian (DARla) and Belarusian (DABM) dialect atlases as well as on reports of field work and surveys conducted by Slavic linguists. The phenomena discussed here represent both diachronic and synchronic aspects of language change across a range of dialects. Variation within a given system is taken to reflect a change in progress, and diverse related developments in dialects are taken to reflect different stages of a diachronic change. Both types of change indicate that morphological restructuring is in the process of taking place or has already taken place as a result of vowel reduction.

A brief overview of vowel reduction is given in section 2. Section 3 presents examples of morphological change resulting from vowel reduction in posttonic syllables in Russian and Belarusian nouns: vowel reduction leads to the reassignment of noun declension class and/or to the introduction of a new inflectional suffix in a given class. Section 4 discusses vowel

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reduction in Russian verbs where homophony is not tolerated between the 3 sg and the 3 pl but where homophony between conjugation classes leads to the restructuring of several verbal paradigms. Relevant coarticulation effects on morphology are mentioned in section 5; discussion and conclusions are in section 6. The term paradigm is used in a narrow sense to refer to each of the declension classes in nouns and each of the conjugation classes in verbs. The term subparadigm refers to a subset of these, e.g., the past tense forms in verbs of a given conjugation class, the plural forms of nouns in a given declension class. For clarity of exposition, stems and suffixes are indicated in phonological representation and in some phonetic transcriptions.

2. Vowel reduction in Russian and Belarusian

Standard Russian (SR) is a stress language which has systematic vowel reduction in unstressed syllables with different reflexes depending on the palatalized/non-palatalized nature of the preceding consonant, as shown in (1).¹ After non-palatalized consonants (C) there are positional differences in the reduced vowel reflexes between the immediately pretonic syllable and other unstressed syllables in SR; less so after palatalized (C^j) consonants. High vowels in unstressed syllables are slightly more lax and centralized after non-palatalized as well as after palatal(ized) consonants, [ɪ] and [ʊ]. Vowel reduction of non-high vowels to [a]/[ɐ]/[ə] after non-palatalized consonants is known as *akan'e* in the Slavic linguistic literature, reduction after palatalized consonants to [ɪ] is known as *ikan'e*.

(1) Unstressed vowel reduction in Standard Russian

	After C (<i>akan'e</i>)		After C ^j (<i>ikan'e</i>)	
	1st pretonic	elsewhere	all positions	
/i/	[i]	[i]	/i/	[ɪ]
/u/	[ʊ]	[ʊ]	/u/	[ʊ]
/o/	[ɐ]	[ə]	/e/	[ɪ]
/a/	[ɐ]	[ə]	/o/	[ɪ]
			/a/	[ɪ]

Examples: /molokó/ 'milk' [mɐlɐkó], /dórogo/ 'expensive' [dórɐgə], /vʲerɐtʲenó/ 'spindle' [vʲɪrʲɪtʲɪnó], /lójɐrɐdʲju/ 'line', instr sg [lójɪrʲɪdʲju], /vixodʲítʲ/ 'to go out' [vixɐdʲítʲ], /prɔtʲanʲ/ 'pull through', 2 sg imper [prɐtʲɪnʲ], /sʲoló/ 'village' [sʲɪló], /stárlíká/ 'old man', acc/gen sg [stɐrʲɪká]

Vowel reduction has been treated as phonological neutralization in Russian (Halle, 1959/1971:70–71; Jakobson, 1929/1971:100; Lightner, 1968; Trubetzkoy, 1934; and others). Vowel reduction after palatalized consonants shows some variation among SR speakers, and the process may not yet be entirely complete in some inflectional suffixes (Barnes, 2006; Bethin, 2012; Padgett and Tabain, 2005; Thelin, 1971). Analyses that take vowel reduction to be phonological neutralization of /a/ and /o/ to /a/ after non-palatalized consonants and of /e/, /o/, and /a/ to /i/ after palatalized consonants recognize that in positions other than the immediately pretonic, the vowel is further reduced or laxed to [ɐ], [ə] or [ɪ] by low level phonetic processes (Halle, 1959/1971), by virtue of prominence reduction (Crosswhite, 2001, 2004) or by raising as a result of abbreviated duration (Barnes, 2006). In post-tonic syllables of SR the phonetic implementation of this reduction is [ə] or [ɪ].

Standard Belarusian (SB) is also a stress-based language in which the contrast among non-high vowels is neutralized to [a] or a more lax [ɐ] in unstressed syllables, and vowel reduction is taken to be categorical and neutralizing (Barnes, 2006:36–37; Czekman and Smułkowa, 1988). The [a] is more common in immediately pretonic position and in final open syllables, otherwise, the reduced vowel tends to be a more central [ɐ] (represented by [α] in Czekman and Smułkowa, 1988:226). Palatalized and non-palatalized consonants are contrastive in SB, just as they are in SR, with the exception that palatalized /t/ and /d/ are affricated to /tsʲ/ and /dzʲ/ in SB (Mayo, 1993:891). Standard Belarusian and southern Russian dialects exhibit a form of vowel reduction where the contrast among non-high vowels is neutralized to [a]/[ɐ] both after non-palatalized as well as palatalized consonants, known as *strong akan'e/jakan'e*, shown in (2). Vowel reduction is reflected in Belarusian orthography, e.g., /vodá/ 'water', nom sg, and /vódi/ nom pl, are spelled *vada*, *vody*, but not in Russian *voda*, *vody*.

¹ Vowel reduction may not be systematic in some prefixes, compounds and borrowings (Avanesov, 1972:167–168, 175–176), and after [j], [ɜ], and [ts] the reflexes of *akan'e* are different for historical reasons (Avanesov, 1972:64–65, 71–72, 186–187; Timberlake, 2004:46–48). There is vowel backing of [ɪ] to [i] after non-palatalized consonants and the historically palatalized but now hard shibilants (claimed to be due to velarization, cf. Padgett, 2001; Timberlake, 2004:46–48), but details are not given here.

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