

Balance in the diachronic development of vowel systems: a case of HoTHoP*

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This paper will show that Balance is a reactive force in the diachronic development of vowel systems. By way of exemplification, I discuss the development of the Slavonic languages from Common Slavonic to the point where the individual languages started to diverge. I also give a detailed analysis of the history of the various Serbo-Croatian dialects, showing that the different ways in which the segment *jat* is realised illustrate a clear case of Homogeneity of Target, Heterogeneity of Process, where the target is a balanced vowel system, and the processes are deletion and addition of a contrast to that system.

1 INTRODUCTION

It is often assumed that symmetry and balance have a part to play in determining the structure of vowel inventories. Campbell (1998: 44) argues that symmetric vowel inventories are more ‘natural’ than asymmetric ones, and that less natural inventories tend to change in order to become more so. This change usually involves the addition of a contrast; e.g., in the hypothetical inventory [i e o a], there is a gap opposite the high, front vowel [i], which could be filled by the high, back vowel [u]. This is illustrated in (1), with the gap marked by shading.

(1) *An imbalanced vowel inventory*

I	
e	O
a	

Chomsky & Halle (1968) go further and suggest that this perceived ‘naturalness’ is due to the fact that symmetric inventories can be fully described by fewer distinctive features than asymmetric ones, and are thus less complex. I take this as my starting point, and argue that symmetry (or Balance) can be defined in terms of distinctive feature values, and that Balance can be shown to influence both synchronic and diachronic phonological processes.

This paper will focus on the role of Balance in the diachronic development of vowel systems. Looking at the development of the Slavonic languages, and in particular at Serbo-Croatian dialects¹, I will show that, at different times, Balance can require both the addition and loss of contrasts in order to make sure the vowel system is balanced.

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¹ This term will be used to describe the dialects spoken in Serbia & Montenegro, Croatia and Bosnia Hercegovina. When discussing differences between the language spoken in particular regions, an indication will be given of which dialects are meant.