

Palatalization and ‘Strong’ /i/ across Inuit Dialects

Proto-Eskimo had four vowels, **/i ə a u/* (Fortescue et al. 1994). They survive as distinct vowels in the Yupik branch of Eskimo but, apart from some sub-dialects of Alaskan Inupiaq, no surface /ə/ remains in the Inuit branch. In most Inuit dialects, this vowel merged with **/i/*. Original **/i/* could cause palatalization of consonants, and 6 of 16 Inuit dialects show palatalization (or former palatalization) (Dorais 2003: 33). In these dialects it is traditional to distinguish between ‘strong *i*’, which descends from **/i/* and causes palatalization, and ‘weak *i*’, which descends from **/ə/* and does not. In some of these dialects the two types of *i* exhibit other kinds of distinct behaviour as well. In the other 10 Inuit dialects, the original distinction between **/i/* and **/ə/* has been lost. None of these 10 dialects show palatalization, a striking fact that needs to be explained.

Six dialects maintained the original palatalization patterns (1a), though the phonetic motivation for distinguishing between types of *i* is gone. This perseveration of a distinction in the absence of its phonetic motivation is a common historical pattern. Ten dialects show no palatalization (1b). It may be that some of these dialects never had palatalization at all, but it is unlikely that none of them did, because dialects with and without palatalization are scattered throughout Alaska, Canada, and Greenland. Therefore, we assume that most of the dialects in (1b) descend, like the dialects in (1a), from a dialect that had palatalization after **i*. Evidently, once **i* and **ə* were no longer distinct, speakers of these dialects opted for a ‘concrete’ solution to the problem of distinguishing which vowels caused palatalization and which did not by simply doing away with palatalization altogether, thus simplifying the phonology. This, too, is a common historical development when an original contrast is lost.

Why, however, do we find no examples of the opposite merger (1c): given a dialect where /i/ causes palatalization, we might expect it to continue doing so, and extend this process to ‘new’ *i* that arise from **ə*. Assuming that palatalization after *i* has phonetic motivation, it is all the more striking that not a single dialect opted for what might appear to be the optimal solution to the merger of the vowels: maintain palatalization (after *i*), *and* simplify the grammar by treating all surface *i* the same. By the same token, why has no three-vowel dialect *innovated* palatalization?

- (1) Diachronic developments from original dialect with palatalization: **/it/ > is* **/ət/ > ət*
 a. Maintain original distinction: 6 b. Lose palatalization: 10 c. Extend palatalization: 0
**it > is, *ət > it* **it > *is > it, *ət > it* **it > is, *ət > it > is*

We argue that we can begin to explain why type (c) is missing if we assume that only *contrastive* features are phonologically active (Dresher, Piggott & Rice 1994, Hall 2007). In the original four-vowel system, we assume that /a/ is contrastively [low], /u/ is contrastively [round], and /i/ is contrastively [front], leaving /ə/ as the ‘unmarked’ vowel (cf. Archangeli & Pulleyblank 1994). The [front] feature of /i/ can (but does not have to) trigger palatalization. In dialects where original **/i ə/* remain distinct (strong vs. weak *i*), the contrastive features remain as they were. Where the merger of the two vowels is complete, we are left with a three-vowel system /i a u/. Here we can have only two contrastive features. In Inuit dialects it appears that the features [low] and [round] take precedence over [front]. Hence, /i/ takes the place of /ə/ as the unmarked vowel. As such, it is unable to trigger palatalization. Thus, this contrastive approach to phonological patterning explains a conspicuous gap in the typology of Inuit dialects.

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References

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