

Analogical Levelling in the Onset Mutation of the North Halmahera languages and Its Role in Historical Reconstruction

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Onset mutation is one of the most striking features of the morphology of the North Halmahera languages, a Papuan language family spoken in the North Moluccas ('Spice Islands', cf Voorhoeve (1987)). The consonantal onset of (mostly) verbal roots mutates into another consonant and vocalic onsets are prefixed with *g-* or *ng-*. The main function of the mutation is to derive nouns from verbal roots, but verb to verb and noun to noun derivations also occur. It is productive and can apply to loan words. The outcome of the mutations differs between the languages but the following general rules can be observed.¹ Voiceless plosives/affricates mutate into their voiced counterparts: /p/ > /b/, /t/ > /d/, /c/ > /j/², /k/ > /g/. Roots with voiced plosives/affricates as onset are usually not affected by mutation but in some languages, a voiced consonant mutates into a nasal: Galela: /d/ > /n/, Tobelo: /ly/ > /n/, Tidore: /y/ > /ny/, all languages: /w/ > /ng/. In some languages, roots with a vocalic onset are always prefixed with *g-*, in some with either *g-* or *ng-*. Roots with /l/, /r/, /s/ or a nasal as onset never participate in mutation. Hence, the mutation is synchronically not triggered by a single phonological feature such as voice or manner of articulation.

Onset mutation plays an important role for the reconstruction of the Proto-North Halmahera phoneme inventory. It can help to identify reflexes of the same proto-phoneme. For example, voiceless plosives in the proto-language which developed into fricatives and approximants mutate into voiced plosives, e.g. /f/ > /b/ in Ternate and Tidore where *p > /f/. Onset mutation can also be an obstacle for reconstruction. Neglecting the phenomenon can lead to wrong assumptions about correspondences between initial consonants. For example, in his tentative sound correspondences, Voorhoeve (1994) lists both /ny/ and /h/ as reflexes of *D in Ternate. However, a comparison with other languages shows that *D regularly mutates into *ny (the above-mentioned mutations Galela: /d/ > /n/ and Tobelo: /ly/ > /n/ also belong here, /n/ is the regular reflex of *ny in these two languages).

Further, analogical levelling has led to irregular synchronic outcomes of the onset mutation. For example, some languages seem to have two unmutated forms for the same lexeme, one with a vocalic onset (prefixed with *g-* after mutation) and one with a initial /k/, e.g. Ternate: *ahulkahu* 'live' > *gahu* 'life'. Comparison with other languages shows that the form with vocalic onset is probably the original one, which means that the form with initial /k/ is perhaps backformed from the mutated form in analogy to the common mutation pattern /k/ > /g/ (e.g. *konora* 'middle' > *gonora* 'waist'). In cases where the initial consonant has undergone phonological change, the mutation has sometimes been levelled out in analogy to the usual mutation pattern of the synchronic onset, e.g. initial *l is lost in Tabaru, **laDem* 'tongue' > *aeme* 'lick'. Initial /l/ does not participate in onset mutation and the mutated form of *aeme* should look like the unmutated form. However, we find *nga-ngaeme* 'tongue' in Tabaru where the now vowel initial root has been prefixed with *ng-* in analogy to other vowel initial roots (e.g. '*odomo* 'eat' > *ngodomo* 'meal').

In my talk, I will present a comparative overview of onset mutation and its history with a special focus on analogical levelling and its impact for reconstruction.

¹Cf. for mutation in the individual languages: van Baarda (1908: 89), van Baarda (1904: 344), Perangin Angin (2014: 135-136), Wimbish (1991: 40), Hueting (1936: 321-322), Fortgens (1928: 406-407), Visser & Voorhoeve (1987: 20), Hayami-Allen (2001: 114), van Staden (2000: 71-72).

²/c/ is either [tʃ] or [c] and /j/ is either [dʒ] or [j]

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