

## Lenitions and fortitions in Slavonic: what, when, and why (not)

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The presentation discusses lenition and fortition phenomena in Proto-Slavonic and the daughter languages. It tackles a typological issue that seems to set Slavic languages apart from others: positional phenomena (i.e. lenition and fortition) are utterly rare without any apparent reason. In order to approach this issue, we first need to define what counts as lenition and fortition. Traditionally, the facts referred to under the header of these notions are opposed to processes such as palatalisation. We formalise this intuition: lenition and fortition are positional phenomena, i.e., where the position in the linear string decides on the segmental effect without the melodic identity of other segments playing any role. Adjacency processes such as palatalisation, on the other hand, crucially refer to melodic properties of some other (more or less distant) segment in their structural description.

In a second step, we scan the Slavonic space and time for positional phenomena. The result is indeed poor. Providing a classification of the processes at hand, we show that most of them are shared by several languages. These processes include, for instance, the vocalisation — i.e., weakening — of [l] in codas (e.g., ‘give-PASSPART’: Slovene *dal* [daw], Serbo-Croat *dao* vs. Czech/Russian *dal*), or the strengthening of [w] to [v], taking place prevocally in some dialects but occurring as a context-free change in some others, cf. Slovene *no[w]* ‘new-NOMSGMASCINDEF’ but *no[v]/i* ‘Id.-DEF’ vs. Serbo-Croat *nov*, *novi* (both with [v]). It also appears that some of the phenomena recur time and again — e.g., the strengthening of yod in post-consonantal position, found in (at least in some dialects of) Proto-Slavonic (e.g., *\*zemja* ‘earth’ > *zeml’a*) as well as some Mazovian dialects of Modern Polish (see also below).

Finally, we establish the significant paucity of lenition and fortition in Slavonic by comparing the record to two sister families, Germanic and Romance. Obviously, the minimal condition for consonantal lenition and fortition to occur is the existence of consonant clusters in a language. This condition being met in all three families, and actually much “more” in Slavonic than in Germanic and Romance, we argue that the paucity of positional processes in Slavonic is undue and needs to be explained. We suggest that the only way to come to grips with this issue is to relate it to some other typological feature characteristic for Slavonic. We present one case where we believe that one typological feature of Slavonic conditions another. Kijak (in prep) has proposed that the particular fortition that occurs in some dialects of Northern Mazovian Polish only occurs post-consonantly, but not word-initially, because Polish allows for “exotic” word-initial clusters, i.e. of equal and falling sonority. The typical Strong Position where fortitions usually occur and where consonants are protected against lenition, is “after heterosyllabic consonants and word-initially”: this is amply documented since the 19th century in many languages, most significantly in Germanic and Romance. In the Polish dialects mentioned, however, only the post-coda position is strong; fortition does not occur word-initially. Kijak argues that this is because unlike Germanic and Romance, Polish has “exotic” initial clusters — hence theory is called to be able to account for both initial peculiarities of Polish with the same explanation. Also, supporting evidence comes from Greek, another language with “exotic” initial clusters (#pt, #kt, #mn), where diachronically only post-coda consonants but not their initial peers prove to resist lenition. The prediction, then, extends to all languages with “exotic” initial clusters (a feature shared by many Slavonic languages): here word-initial consonants will not be strong.

Reference:

Kijak, Artur in preparation. Post-consonantal strengthening in Mazowian Polish. Ph.D dissertation,  
Univesity of Wrocław.