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New vowels in Mari: Iranian loanwords and Uralic inheritance

Since Bereczki (1994) and Aikio (2014) it has been the consensus that two vowel correspondences in Mari point to a loan origin for the given word: 1) *a* across all Mari varieties and 2) Meadow Mari and Eastern Mari *a* versus Northwestern Mari and Hill Mari *ä*. This was necessitated by the raising of Proto-Uralic **ä* and **a* in Mari, but the details have differed: Bereczki reconstructed only a single new low vowel **a* for Proto-Mari; Aikio reconstructed Proto-Mari **a* and **ä*; and Napolskikh & Savelyev (2023) have reconstructed only a single **ä* while claiming that the correspondences underlying Aikio's purported **a* represent a post-Proto-Mari development.

Most recently, Culver (2025) has proposed inherited etymologies for some Mari words with pan-Mari first-syllable *a*, in cases where earlier Proto-Uralic **-aCj-* or **-ajC-* can be reconstructed. This talk presents some Iranian loan evidence in support of this phonetic development: Mari *manaš* 'to say' can be derived from the Alanic descendant of Proto-Iranian **man-yo-* 'to consider', and by comparing the derivational history on both sides, we can establish that Mari *mut* 'word', too, is ultimately a borrowing from the same Iranian verb (cf. Ossetic *mǣt* 'consideration').

The talk will then turn to the new Proto-Mari tense vowel **ê* that Savelyev (2022) reconstructs. A different triggering environment than proposed will be considered based on Mari *mež* 'wool' (Iranian loan) and *ter* 'sled' (inherited). On the other hand, in Mari *peŋam* 'burn (of sun); smolder' we do not find tense **ê* as the new reconstruction demands, and the word may be traced to a derived form of PU **päjwä* 'sun; heat'.

Finally, the talk will note Mari *šaške* 'mink' (cf. the hitherto unnoticed Udmurt *čajj* id. alongside the traditional comparison to Veps and Baltic material) and Mari *paŋga* 'палочка' (cf. Erzya Mordvin *piŋgä* id., which in Paasonen's dictionary is regarded as a derivation from PU **pä̃ji* 'head'), which may result from still-unknown rules for retention of PU **ä*, or point to borrowing from neighboring varieties of Uralic.

References

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