

## **A reappraisal of the vowel system of Proto-Mansi**

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The development of the vowel systems of the Mansi varieties stands in need of systematic update. The most detailed treatise remains Steinitz (1955), who reconstructs a large yet fairly asymmetric system with three vowel heights and vowel length. A more compact system was proposed by Honti (1980, 1982), pared down to two vowel heights, but facing criticism already at the time (Tálos 1984, Helinski 1985). With different adjustments, the system recently sketched by Zhivlov (2023) shows again closer structural similarity to Steinitz' system, unfortunately including its main asymmetries.

I present an overarching reanalysis of the reconstruction. Firstly, external comparison and general typology of vowel system chainshifts indicate that the elimination of height contrasts has indeed not been the correct solution, and Proto-Mansi should be still reconstructed with three degrees of vowel height, as attested in all varieties of Mansi and reconstructed also for Proto-Uralic. There exists however also an opening for questioning instead the reconstruction of vowel length. It was already seen by Honti that the length contrast as reconstructed by him would continue as such only in Northern Mansi, and more or less major reshuffling would be required in all other varieties. Reconstructing instead parallel rise of vowel length in the post-Proto-Mansi period, with distinct conditions in each dialect group, simplifies the phonological and phonetic trajectories and accords better with the evidence of loanwords from e.g. Komi.

A second result targets the reconstruction of vowel rounding. Most reconstructions have agreed on a four-way quality contrast among the close vowels: \*i, \*ü, \*j, \*u. The non-cardinal vowels \*ü, \*j however show limited phonological distribution and poor retention in the Mansi varieties, and allowing for conditional development in particular consonant environments, they can be dispensed with. For short \*j and Steinitz' long \*ū, which have seen little treatment in later works due to their absence from native Uralic or common Ob-Ugric etymologies, this does bear a cost of positing a marginal contrast between velar \*k and uvular \*q, treated as allophonic in previous work but phonemicized in any case in most of the attested dialects.

The newly obtained Proto-Mansi system appears remarkably close to systems such as those reconstructed for Proto-Ugric by Sammallahti (1988) or Proto-Ob-Ugric by Zhivlov (2023). This vindicates especially the methodological critique of Tálos (1984), who considered Honti's approach to reconstruction to place undue weight on the evidence of Khanty. More

severe systemic divergence leading to the attested Mansi dialects might be, regardless, attributable to later Mansi–Khanty Sprachbund effects, which are thus seen to be yet stronger than has been recognized in the past — and further underlining the necessity of comparing Mansi also with its more distant Uralic relatives, not only with its presumed sister branch.

### **Literature**

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