

The Typology of Old Norwegian Vowel Transparency

Transparent or neutral segments—those that are skipped by harmony—are very common among harmony languages but vary in very limited ways as to what factors condition their transparency. I will present a new and cross-linguistically unique form of harmonic transparency found in Old Norwegian, which has not yet been discussed in typological literature. Nevins (2010) has demonstrated that transparent segments in harmony languages occur for one of three reasons: *a*) they are not contrastive for the harmonic feature (e.g. /i/ in Finnish palatal harmony); *b*) they do not bear a marked value of the harmonic feature (e.g. /u/ in Sibe height harmony); or *c*) they do not bear the harmonic feature at all (e.g. labial consonants in Turkish palatal harmony); and he illustrates how this cross-linguistic variation can be accurately modeled using parameters which relativize harmonization to these three classes. This model is however too restrictive as it prohibits a fourth kind of harmony transparency found in Old Norwegian [\pm high] harmony.

Old Norwegian featured rightwards height harmony via vowel lowering, resulting in regular *i/e* and *u/o* alternations in non-initial syllables (2a–d). The only exceptions are short, low [æ] and [ɔ] vowels, which are transparent and followed by [+high vowels] (2g–j).

(1) Old Norwegian vowel inventory

[−back, −rd]	[−back, +rd]	[+back, +rd]	[+back, −rd]	
i/ei	y/øy	u/au		[+high, −low]
e	ø	o		[−high, −low]
æ		ɔ	a	[−high, +low]

(2) Old Norwegian [\pm high] alternations (*Óláfs saga hins helga* (DG 8) c 1225–50)

a.	syn-i	son-DAT.M.SG.	g.	hvær-ir	every-NOM.M.PL.
b.	land-e	land-DAT.N.SG.	h.	hvær-jum	every-DAT.M.PL.
c.	hu:s-um	houses-DAT.N.PL.	i.	söðl-i	saddle-DAT.M.SG.
d.	rɔ:ð-om	council-DAT.N.PL.	j.	söð-ul	saddle-ACC.M.SG.

These transparent harmony patterns have long been known in Norse philological circles, having first been described by Keyser & Unger (1849) and since confirmed by a wide variety of 12th–13th-century manuscript, charter, and runic material (Hægstad 1899, Skomedal 1980, Johnsen 2003, Myrvoll 2014, among others). There have however been very few linguistic investigations of the phenomenon (Rajić 1975, 1980), and the source of these transparent harmony patterns is therefore still very poorly understood. But they constitute an important exception to Nevin’s (2010) framework since these vowels do bear and are contrastive for [\pm high], and the harmony procedure is not limited by any markedness constraint, as indicated by other [+low]-harmonic vowels (2b,d). These patterns therefore demand an alternative analysis and illustrate the important role historical languages still play in informing language typology and linguistic theory. I will present how the historical development of /æ/–/ɔ/ vowels might better explain the source of their neutral patterns and make recommendations about how Nevin’s (2010) approach can be modified to accommodate Old Norwegian transparency.

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