THE QUALITY OF NASAL CLUSTERS IN PRASUN

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Georg Morgenstierne, NTS 15 (1949) p. 210 § 50, has stated correctly that in Prasun a nasal is assimilated not only to a following unvoiced plosive, but also to a following voiced plosive or z. Thus we get such forms as wūtu 'road', wuču 'five', wōzu 'holly-oak'.

The vowels of Prasun have been declared by Morgenstierne to present many a baffling problem, but as with our experience with other languages, I feel that with careful analysis the uncertainties are by no means as great as they may at first seem. In the case of the present set of phenomena under discussion I believe that we may bring a further point of clarification to the observed vocalisms of Prasun. If one studies the words descending from the above-mentioned features attentively, one notices a rather large proportion of front vocalisms. These vocalisms become readily justified if one supposes that in a great many cases the vowel was fronted by the neighboring nasal cluster, which subsequently has been resolved according to the above rule.

Specifically it seems that this fronting occurs whenever the vowel does not follow a labial element, i.e. a segment which we may characterize as [+round]. In the above examples it will be noted that a labial element clearly precedes the vocalism, and in almost all such cases we have a very clear idea of the ancestry of this labial element.

Examples where fronting has occurred are as follows: lūtəm 'tooth', čūtu 'leopard', elrəc 'entrails', wyoído 'to laugh' (*khand-), iğil 'finger', iškyōp/ž 'bridge', ūšyōbu 'tree'.

Since these vowels appear to have been fronted in this specific
environment we must suppose that the fronting was caused by
the nature of the consonantism which once possessed the nasal.
Since moreover there is nothing about the resulting consonants
that shows any such essential feature we must presume that the
feature in question which caused the conditioning was originally
in the nasal segment which has now disappeared. In order to
explain such a fronted articulation it seems most likely that the
nasal segment once contained a palatalized articulation. We
therefore presume that the nasal segment in such clusters was
somehow palatalized before its disappearance, and that this palatalization
was then transmitted to the neighboring vowel in the
form of fronting. If, however, a labial element preceded this vowel
the fronting was blocked.

The mechanism which caused such a palatalization in clusters
is not immediately apparent, but the fact of its occurrence and
its subsequent effect seems inescapable.

A reasonable, but purely hypothetical, interstage would have
been the development of a nasalized syllabic span which closed
with a glide element. Such a set of features would parallel some-
what the development found e.g. in Polish, where for *VN we
find [Ṽw], with a labialized glide. Somewhat differently in our
case, the glide would have developed with front articulation.
Hence *VNC > *ṼJC > *ṼCJC > ṽC /[-round]—. Perhaps [±round]
was better specified at that time as [±back].

On the basis of these observations we may now improve the
account of two important names in the Prasun valley (see op. cit.
192). The Prasun name Ūšiatt now seems preferably to be recon-
structed *kusantā; and the Prasun form Ūšiatt seems to be best
reconstructed as *pā(r)anta- or *pā(k)anta-. These two names
seem to share the same suffix -(a)nt-.

Since the last named place is located on a huge cliff it is
reasonable for it to be called ‘the place of the rock’, and we may
compare Waiguši paśā, Kati paṛṣi: Skt. (< Pkt.) pāṣya- pāṣana-
‘stone’ < ‘rock, crag’; Cf. E. P. Hamp, Journal of Linguistics 3,
1967, 89, and “An amendment to Fortunatov’s Law”, S. K. Chatter-
jee Felicitation Volume (forthcoming).

1 I am indebted to Georg Buddrus for this information.