THE CONVERGENCE OF CONTACTING PHONOLOGICAL SYSTEMS:
THE ALEUT DIALECT OF COPPER ISLAND

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ABSTRACT

The Aleuts of Copper Island speak a creolised version of Aleut-Russian Pidgin that formed by the end of the XIX c. a result of lingustic contact and interference. The consequences of this contact can be traced in the change of phoneme inventory, in higher variability of consonants, and in certain phonotactical processes in clusters.

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

The Aleut language has at present two main dialects, belonging subdivisions of what was known in the XIX century as Western Aleut: Attuk (ATK) and Attuan dialect (ATT), named according to the main islands where the dialects are spoken: Attu and Attu Island (see /2, p. 49/ for details and further references). In 1826 the administration of Russian-American Company transferred several dozens of Aleut workers that were in its service to previously uninhabited islands in order to have constant access to the Bering Island and especially Copper Island or the Aleut Islands (CI) that have passed since that time the newcomers have developed two different dialects: Bering Island dialect (BI) that is a conservative form of ATK, and a creolised Copper Island dialect (CI) of which ATK is considered to be the "maternal" dialect.

In this paper we adhere to the hypothesis according to which certain social and historical conditions led to formation by the second half of the XIX century of a peculiar social speech group of Russian-speaking "creol". This social group later created "Fidgin Aleut" as a means of communication with the Aleut-speaking population of the islands. The newly created language went in course of time through creolisation and subsequent phonological reorganisation of the Aleut basis resulting in the modern version of CI (see /2/ for details and further discussion).

The most conspicuous grammatical feature of CI is its system of verbal inflexion for person, number, tense, and mood, as well as negative forms that have definite Russian origin. The rest grammatical subsystems are typically Aleut: nominal inflexion, derivation of both verbs and nouns, NP syntax, a.o.

The present paper is outlined to phonological consequences of converging sound systems, of Russian and Aleut that resulted in a formation of a rather peculiar CI phonological system.

There are at least three points in CI phonology where we can suspect Russian influence in the absence of a phonological inventory 2. The corruption of velar/uvular opposition; 3. Consonant clusters.

THE PHONEME INVENTORY

Professor Knut Bergsland called the absence of labial consonants /p,b/ the most conspicuous feature of Aleut phonology, and considered it to be of diachronic character /p/. However, word classes where he did his field work on Attu at the beginning of the XIX century, used letters b and p also marks "bilabials", pronounced with a very slight closure of the lips so that we have two phonemes between b and w, p and f, s, /2, p.191/; see also /5, p.191/. A.Bergsland who transcribed Jesou-Canadas' Aleut texts rendered his p and b as v /2, p.9/, i.e. he rightly treated them as two allophones of one and the same phoneme /b/ depending on its position.

The choice between /p/ and /b/ is definitely positional: ATK /p/ > CI /b/ before consonants, voiced fricatives or vowels, and /p/ > /b/ before voiceless consonants: ATK /bulakua/, CI babulakua chin; ATK /invupu/, CI invupu 8. In two cases the substitution is reversed: where in ATK we have /g/, in CI we have /h/ pronounced with /x/ or with /h/ alternately by one and the same speaker, e.g. ATK aga /a/ to die, a.o.

In two cases the substitution is reversed: where in ATK we have /g/, in CI we find /h/ (e.g. ATK aga: CI ha:). Finally, there are even cases when the voiced fricative /g/ is pronounced as a voiceless stop /h/ - a sound unknown to the English speakers. In 2.90%, ATT and ATK; /rn/oo /nr/: ATT /ln/oo, ATK /nr/. /hn/oo /hr/: ATT /hn/, ATK /hr/.

In Aleut (and Eskimo) there are two peculiar social speech clusters e-g- axsa=/ahsa= to die, a.o. CI /g/ is pronounced as /h/ - a sound unknown to the English speakers. In 2.90%,ATT and ATK; /rn/oo /nr/: ATT /hn/, ATK /hr/.

The choice between /p/ and /b/ is definitely positional: ATK /p/ > CI /b/ before...
consonants, CI develops its own order either independently or perhaps yielding to BI influence.

The tendency of cluster organization can also be treated as a result of language contact; most probably, its source can be found in the Russian influence which is very strong in CI. CI seems to be the only Aleut dialect that developed so consistent a tendency of cluster shape.

BI INFLUENCE

There are several cases when changes in CI compared to ATT probably took place as a result of direct BI borrowing, cf.: ATT /ŋ/ → CI /n/: ATT haanuh, CI haanuh, ATK haanuh salmon; ATT /v/ → CI /m/ (not the usual /b/): ATT kiv=, CI kim=, ATK kim= to descend, to walk down.

CONCLUSION

The phonology of CI differs noticeably from that of other Aleut dialects. These differences are most likely due to the specific position of CI among other Aleut dialects as a creolized Pidgin Aleut. Many changes that occurred in CI compared to maternal ATT can be explained by Russian interference. Other changes may have occurred as a result of permanent contact with BI. The possibility of independent development should be also taken into consideration.

REFERENCES