



# On the development of vowels in the Ugric languages and the problem of Proto-Ugric

- Sampsa Holopainen, University of Vienna & Austrian Academy of Sciences
- International Conference on Historical Linguistics 25, Oxford, 1–5 August 2022

## Research problem

- The aim of this study is to assess the alleged vowel-changes leading from Proto-Uralic/Finno-Ugric (PU) into Proto-Ugric (PUG), the common ancestor of Hungarian and the Ob-Ugric languages (Khanty and Mansi).
- There is no commonly accepted, up-to-date phonological reconstruction of this intermediary proto-language, making its existence uncertain.

## Background, methodology

- Taxonomy of the Uralic family is debated (Tálos 1984: 95–96; Salminen 2002); true innovations and areal innovations are sometimes difficult to distinguish. Binary family-tree has led to reconstruction of unnecessary changes into the intermediary proto-languages.
- There is possible evidence for Proto-Ugric in morphology, lexicon and the development of consonants (Honti 1998; Zhivlov 2016); however, many of the consonant changes (PU \*ś > PUG \*s; PU \*s, \*š > PUG \*θ; PU \*ŋ > ? PUG \*ŋk) show different conditions within Ugric and might have spread areally.
- Methodological problems: the traditional view of sporadic sound-change and "tendencies" (instead of sound-laws) in Uralic studies.
- The Proto-Ugric reconstructions by Sammallahti (1988) and WOT differ markedly and both include various problems (analysed below) and do not fit up-to-date reconstructions of Proto-Uralic vocalism (Aikio 2012; Zhivlov 2014).
- Reconstruction of Proto-Ob-Ugric also involves problems (Tálos 1984: 91–95); the suggested Proto-Ugric systems do not fit the recent Proto-Ob-Ugric reconstruction by Zhivlov (2007).

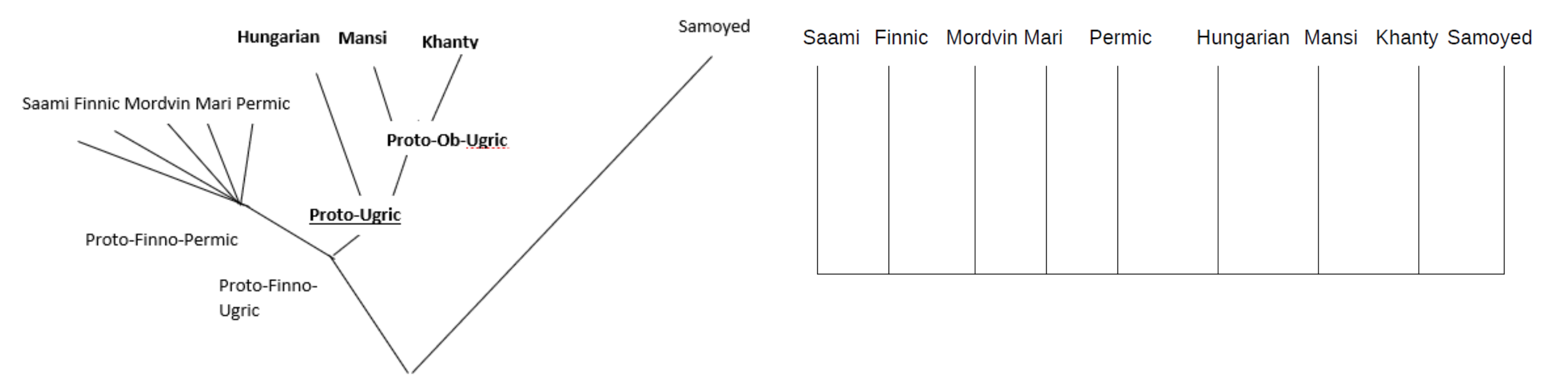
## Problems with Ugric lexical innovations and phonological reconstruction

- Much of the Ugric vocabulary reconstructed in the UEW is irregular; reconstruction of vocalism is often neglected, making research on historical phonology difficult.
- It is known that loanwords from Iranian languages (Hu *hét*, East Khanty *läwət*, South Mansi *sāt* 'seven' ← Ir \**sapta*; Hu *ostor*, South Mansi *astər* 'whip' ← Ir \**aštrā*-) were borrowed separately into Khanty, Mansi and Hungarian or "Common Ugric" (Holopainen 2019: 339–344); a large part of the Proto-Ugric vocabulary displays similar irregular correspondences, pointing to possible borrowings rather than shared lexical innovations.

## Examples of possible Ugric cognates in UEW showing irregular vocalism

- Hu *nyerég*, East Khanty *nöyər* (< PKh \**nōyər*), South Mansi *näwrä* 'saddle' (< PMs \**näyrä*; Zhivlov 2016: 300); UEW: PUG \**närks*
- Hu *íz*, East Khanty *jöt* 'limb' (< ? PKh \**jüt*); UEW: PUG \**jötš*
- Hu *szalu*, East Kh *suval* (< ? PKh \**sūval* ~ \**sōval*), North Ms *sowli* 'axe for scooping' (< ? PMs \**saylV*); UEW: PUG \**səlks* (*səlɣs*)

Examples of alleged PUG changes (see the handout)	Example etymologies (Proto-Khanty and Proto-Mansi reconstructions from Zhivlov 2007, Aikio 2013)	Commentary
PU *u > PUG *u in closed syllables before a nasal or a liquid followed by a sonorant vs. PUG *ū elsewhere (Sammallahti 1988: 500)	PU *tulka 'feather' > PUG *tülka > Hu <i>toll</i> , PKh * <i>tuyəl</i> (Sammallahti: * <i>toyəl</i> ), PMs * <i>tāwəl</i> PU *kuŋi- 'close eyes' > Hu <i>huny-</i> , PKh * <i>kuŋi-</i> (Sammallahti: * <i>kon-</i> ), PMs * <i>kāŋi</i> PU *lunta 'goose' > PUG *lunta > Hu <i>lúd</i> (: <i>luda-</i> ), PKh * <i>lōnt</i> (Sammallahti: * <i>läánt</i> ), PMs * <i>lānt</i>	The reflexes of *u in Hungarian and Ob-Ugric are divergent and probably show conditioned changes that are inadequately understood; however, the different reflexes do not correspond to the split assumed by Sammallahti (1988).
PU *a > PUG *o after *p, *w (Sammallahti 1988: 500)	PU *pata 'kettle, pot' > Hu <i>fazék</i> , Ms * <i>pūt</i> , Kh * <i>pūt</i>	No evidence for this PUG change, the suggested Ob-Ugric cognates reflect Uralic *a-a -stems (Zhivlov 2014: 124). Hu <i>a</i> reflects earlier *a (but not *o) in *a-a -stems regularly.
PU *e > PUG *i in -i-stems before open syllables (Sammallahti 1988: 500)	PU *peli- 'feather' > PUG *pili > Hu <i>fél</i> , PKh * <i>pil-</i> (Sammallahti: * <i>pel-</i> ), PMs * <i>pil-</i> PU *wəri 'blood' > PUG *wiri > Hu <i>vér</i> , PKh * <i>wir</i> (Sammallahti: * <i>wer</i> ), PMs * <i>wiyr</i>	No evidence for PUG *i in Hungarian (examples like <i>fél</i> 'feather', <i>vér</i> 'blood' show regular *e > é in Hungarian); few etymologies (PU * <i>meni-</i> > Hu <i>mén-go</i> , * <i>edi</i> > <i>eló</i> 'front') show apparently irregular vocalism in Hungarian.
PU *i > PUG *ī (Sammallahti 1988: 500)	PU *šilmä 'eye' > PUG *šilmä > Hu <i>szém</i> , Kh * <i>sām</i> (Sammallahti: * <i>seem</i> ), Ms * <i>sām</i>	Changes of PU *i took place separately in Hungarian and Ob-Ugric; the change *i > ē [e] late in Hungarian, visible in relatively late loans (Hu <i>betű</i> ← Turkic * <i>bitiŋ</i> 'letter'); also conditioned changes like PU *wi- > Hu <i>ő-</i> (likewise visible in loans, Hu <i>özvegy</i> 'widow' ← Alanic * <i>widæʒ</i> ) show that *i was intact in Proto-Hungarian.
Merger of the PU stem-vowels -a, -ā and *-i as *-ø (WOT: 1041)	PU *kala 'fish' > PUG *kalə > Hu <i>hal</i> (: <i>hala-</i> ), PKh * <i>kūl</i> , PMs * <i>kūl</i> PU *kunji 'moon' > PUG *koŋə > Hu <i>hó</i> , PKh * <i>kuw</i>	Proto-Uralic stem-types *a-a vs. *a-i, *o-a vs. *o-i etc. show different vocalism in all three languages (Zhivlov 2014: 124); clearly no PUG merger.
PU *u > PUG *o (WOT: 1045–1046)	PU *kulkki- 'go' > PUG *kolkə > Hu <i>halad</i> 'proceed', Kh * <i>kōyəl-</i> (WOT: * <i>koyəl</i> ) PU *puna- 'spin' > PUG *ponə- > Hu <i>fon</i> , Kh * <i>panəl-</i> (WOT: * <i>pun</i> ), Ms * <i>pān-</i> (WOT: * <i>pūn</i> )	Ad hoc choice to reconstruct PUG *o; *u > Hu <i>o</i> a late (Old Hungarian) change. (See above for problems with the reflexes of PU *u.)



Family-trees showing different views of the taxonomy of Uralic and Ugric: a more traditional view (left) and the view of Tapani Salminen (2002).

## Conclusions

- ✓ No convincing vowel changes common to Hungarian, Khanty and Mansi have been suggested.
- ✓ Lack of common changes involving vowels fits the idea that many of the shared traits (such as a large part of the vocabulary) of Ugric are areal innovations.

## Acknowledgement

The author is a fellowship holder of the Austrian Academy of Sciences (APART-GSK) at the Finno-Ugric department of the University of Vienna. See <https://ugric.univie.ac.at> for more information on the project *Hungarian historical phonology reexamined*.



• University of Vienna, EVSL, Finno-Ugric Studies  
 • sampsa.petteri.holopainen@univie.ac.at  
 • See the handout ([https://ugric.univie.ac.at/fileadmin/user\\_upload/p\\_ugric/ICHL25\\_handout\\_Holopainen.pdf](https://ugric.univie.ac.at/fileadmin/user_upload/p_ugric/ICHL25_handout_Holopainen.pdf)) for more data and examples.

- Selected references (see the handout for a full list):
- Aikio, Ante 2012: On Finnic long vowels, Samoyed vowel sequences, and Proto-Uralic \*x. *Per Urales ad Orientem (FS Janhunen)*. Helsinki. 227–250.
- Aikio, Ante 2013: Uralilaisen kantakielen vokaalistoista. Handout, Etymologia ja kiellistoria: Erkki Itkonen ja Aulis J. Joen 100-vuotijuhlaseminaari, Helsinki 19.4.2013.
- Holopainen, Sampsa 2019: *Indo-Iranian borrowings in Uralic*. PhD thesis, University of Helsinki.
- Honti, László 1998: Ob-Ugric. Daniel Abondolo (ed.), *Uralic languages*. London – New York. 327–357.
- Salminen, Tapani 2002: Problems in the taxonomy of the Uralic languages in the light of modern comparative studies. *Лингвистический беспредел (FS Kuznetsova)*. Moscow.
- Sammallahti, Pekka 1988: Historical phonology of the Uralic languages. Denis Sinor (ed.), *Uralic languages*. Leiden – Boston. 478–554.
- Tálos, Endre 1984: *Vogul + osztják/2. Nyelvtudományi közlemények* 86. 89–99.
- UEW = Károly Rédei 1986–1991: *Uralisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*. Wiesbaden.
- WOT = András Róna-Tas & Árpád Berta 2011: *West Old Turkic. Turkic loanwords in Hungarian*. Wiesbaden.
- Zhivlov, Mikhail 2007: К вопросу о реконструкции обско-угорского вокализма. *Aspects of Comparative Linguistics*, 2. Moscow. 281–309.
- Zhivlov, Mikhail 2014: Studies in Uralic vocalism III. *Journal of Language Relationship* 12. 116–148.
- Zhivlov, Mikhail 2016: The origin of Khanty retroflex nasal. *Journal of Language Relationship* 14/4. 293–302.