

Just a Boy and His Birch Bark: The phonology of Onfim's Old Novgorodian

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The Old Novgorodian dialect of Old Russian is known to us from birch bark fragments from the 11th through to the 15th century. I analyze here the mid-13th-century texts of Onfim, a preliterate Novgorodian child. His texts provide external linguistic evidence on how speakers analyzed their language, something often missing for languages only attested in writing. Specifically, I argue that Onfim's syllable exercises suggest that [j] was underlyingly /i/. This analysis became untenable with the loss of jers (*ь*, *ѣ*) in weak position, a sound change occurring in Novgorod at the same time as Onfim was writing. However, Onfim's non-standard spellings provide support for the presence of weak jers, suggesting a later date for jer loss. In conclusion, Onfim's birch bark fragments teach us about the phonology of Old Novgorodian, and can help us date one of the more important sound changes in the history of the Slavic languages.

In Onfim's texts we find syllable exercises iterating through the consonants with a fixed following vowel: *ba va ga da ... be ve ge de ... bi vi gi di ...*. Two omissions consistently occur here: no syllables begin in *dz* or in yod ([j]). These are missing three times each in fragment No. 199, and once each in Nos. 201, 204, 206. This is not because Onfim could not write the relevant letters, which are found in alphabet exercises and texts of Onfim's own composition as well as copies of psalms. However, in Old Novgorodian, earlier *dz* /dz/ and *z* /z/ had merged as /z/ (Schmalstieg 1995: 13, 15), suggesting that Onfim was writing distinctive consonant sounds rather than distinctive letters. There was no /dz/ distinct from /z/, so *dz* was left out. I argue that phonetic [j] was underlyingly a vowel /i/, and not a distinctive consonant sound on its own, explaining its omission. [j]-[i] allophony is inherited into Old Russian (Le Guillou 1972: 5) from its ancestors (Schenker 1993: 82 on Proto-Slavic, Fortson 2010: 62 on Proto-Indo-European). However, [j] became distinctive with weak jer deletion (for the sound change see Havlík 1889). Earlier [mojь]-[moji] (NOM MASC SG and PL of 'my, mine' respectively; Schmalstieg 1995: 39) changed to [moj]-[mo(j)i] with loss of weak jers and intervocalic [j] loss (Schmalstieg 1995: 32). At this later stage, only the [j]-[i] contrast obligatorily distinguished these words from each other.

Onfim's writings are from the mid-13th century (Zaliznjak 2004: 476, 477; Schaeken 2012: 101-105). While occasional examples of jer loss occur earlier than this, Shevelov (1964: 459) puts "the real loss of jers" in the mid-13th century in Novgorod (Schmalstieg 1995: 25), right at the time of Onfim's texts. However, Onfim consistently writes weak jers, even in texts which are clearly his own (*ь* in Nos. 199, 331, and *ѣ* in No. 331). Moreover, he non-standardly writes them using full vowels (Zaliznjak 2004: 477), so that his orthography is not simple copying of prescriptive writing norms.¹ This shows that weak jers were still present, and suggests that Novgorodian jer loss should be dated to the latter half of the 13th century.

I have shown that there are consistent omissions in Onfim's syllable exercises which can be explained phonologically. The exercises represent distinctive consonant sounds in Old Novgorodian rather than going through the consonantal letters of the alphabet: *dz* was a letter but no longer a phoneme, merging with /z/, while [j] was underlyingly /i/ at the time of Onfim's fragments. Deriving [j] from /i/ relies on the presence of weak jers in mid-13th-century Old Novgorodian, a controversial assumption since jers were being lost in Novgorod at precisely this time. However, there is strong evidence for weak jers in Onfim's non-standard spellings, suggesting that jer loss in Novgorod took place later than otherwise assumed. In conclusion, Onfim's birch bark fragments can provide insight into the sound system of a language that is no longer spoken, and help us date an important Slavic sound change.

1 Jers do appear in standard form in alphabet exercises (Nos. 199, 201, 205), which is likely due to copying.

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