

ABSTRACT

South Macedonian decomposed nasal vowels are not an archaism but an early Balkanism

In the South Macedonian dialects around Kostur (Gr. Kastoriá) and Solun (Gr. Thessaloníki), Common Slavic nasal vowels are often represented by an oral vowel followed by a nasal consonant, e.g. *dəmp* ‘oak’ < *dǫbъ*, or *grenda* ‘beam’ < *gręda* (cf. Standard Macedonian *dab*, *greda*, Standard Bulgarian *dab*, *greda*). Usually such decomposed nasal vowels are regarded as archaisms which show that the dialects in question were the last to lose the nasal vowel phonemes. However, there is an alternative scenario: in these southern dialects, the nasal vowels were decomposed into sequences of an oral vowel + a nasal consonant so *early* that they escaped the later denasalization that took place in most Slavic dialects. There are two arguments in favour of this scenario:

First, decomposed nasality typically occurs before stops or affricates – either original stops, as in *dəmp* and *grenda*, or secondary affricates, as in *mənč*, def. *məndžó(t)* ‘man’ < *mǫžъ*; before primary or secondary voiced stops and affricates there are also instances of secondary nasal consonants in these dialects, such as in *rəndží* ‘it neighs’ < *rǫžitъ*, cf. Standard Mac. *rži*. The phenomenon is obviously connected to the special status of clusters of a nasal consonant and a homorganic stop in Balkan languages. This feature, as many other Balkanisms, is not realized in an identical fashion in different Balkan languages, but the general trend is that such clusters resemble monophonemic prenasalized stops in some respects. In Greek, such prenasalized stops occupy the position of voiced stops in the consonantal system at least from the fourth century CE on. In Albanian, prenasalized stops can occur also word-initially. Moreover, Albanian and Balkan Romance changed Latin words with a nasal consonant and a homorganic stop in a partly similar fashion, cf. Latin *angustus* ‘narrow, tight’ > Alb. *ngushtë*, Romanian *îngust*. It is not plausible to assume that this Balkanism would have affected some Slavic dialects only many centuries later, and then precisely those dialects that for some unrelated reason happened to have preserved the old nasal vowels.

The second argument comes from Glagolitic OCS, which originally marked the nasal vowels with a special letter Ѣ written after the letter for the corresponding oral vowel. I do not claim, as Trubetzkoy did, that this letter was a sign for a special nasal archiphoneme; but it did reflect the partial decomposition of the nasal vowels that had started in the dialects around Thessaloniki in the 9th century. The letter was also used for the first component of the prenasalized stops in borrowings from Greek, even in the word ⱭѢꙗꙗꙗ *ang’elъ* (Psalt.Sin.), though no nasal *a* existed in Slavic. Later, when Glagolitic came to be used for Slavic dialects where no such decomposition had taken place, Ѣ was reinterpreted as a sign for the front nasal vowel *e*.