Issues in the phonology of Old Hungarian non-sibilant fricatives

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The natural class of non-sibilant fricatives [h x ç ɣ v f] presents a number of interesting questions for historical phonology as well as for general phonological theory. The present paper attempts to contextualize and discuss those questions that pertain more properly to the historical phonology of Hungarian. Several processes that affected non-sibilant fricatives have been presented in the literature (e.g. Bárczi 1958, E. Abaffy 2005) as more or less isolated changes discussed under a variety of rubrics (metathesis, vocalization as well as others). However, it is clear that these changes form a coherent set. The set of changes affecting non-sibilant fricatives spanning the entire OHu period consistently erased all coda non-sibilant fricatives mainly through vocalization (except for [f], which was restricted to onset to begin with), e.g. [eɣ] > [eɥ] > [ø:], cf. *fő* 'head' or [Vçt] > [Vjt] > [V:t], cf. *tanít* 'teach', but also witness the loss of coda [v] ([w]?) in words such as *ló* 'horse'. Metathesis of coda [h] was systematic in all cases that had been left intact by other changes (e.g. [xt] > [çt] > [jt] within OHu). Contrary to previous claims, metathesis of [h] was not only systematic with a following nasal. There is only one substantive constraint on h-metathesis, never previously described, but possibly of typological and theoretical relevance: word-initial position is an illicit target due to its extreme salience, hence no metathesis in e.g. [me:h] 'womb' or [roh] 'red or black colour'; in such a position the [h] could be lost.

The paper also presents data that show the lexically specific and divergent development of the frequent verb-forming suffix [Vçt]. Complex interactions with other concatenated morphological elements of different phonological shapes as well as processes of morphological levelling have led to a great variety of forms. Of the relevant morphemes the imperative itself consisted of the non-sibilant fricative [ɣ] historically, leading to the assimilated sequence [çç], which proved particularly unstable and was either replaced by an analogically motivated obstruent or was lenited to [jj]. Lexical divergence manifests itself in the behaviour of several verbs in certain sources, e.g. *gyűjt* 'gather' vs. *gyújt* 'kindle', *feszít* 'stretch' vs. *tanít* 'teach' in Gábor Pesti's New Testament translation. An attempt is made in the paper to disentangle the intricate patterns of phonological, morphological and lexical conditioning that explain the attested variety of forms.