Velar Palatalization in Altai Plautdietsch as Markedness Reduction
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Abstract

The present paper investigates word-initial and -medial [k] ~ [tʲ] alternations found in Rogier Nieuweboer’s 1999 grammar of the Altai dialect of Plautdietsch (a.k.a. West Siberian Mennonite Low German), wherein [k] surfaces as [tʲ] before front vowels in such examples as [kʰəu] ~ [tʲʰi:] (“cow” ~ “cows”) and [kʰɔ:n] ~ [tʲʰe:ne] (“can” ~ “can” infinitive). It will be shown that a synchronic process referred to as “velar palatalization” is responsible for these alternations, and that the consonants [r], [l], and [n] are transparent to this process, illustrated by examples like [krəp] ~ [tʲrɪpt] (“crawled” ~ “crawls”). In contrast to non-front vowels and [k], which are dorsal, front vowels and [tʲ] will be analyzed as coronal to account for palatalization. An analysis within the framework of Optimality Theory will be proposed, wherein an interaction of markedness and faithfulness constraints motivates a process of assimilation that results in a less-marked output, and therefore markedness reduction. Two non-crucially ranked markedness constraints, *Dors and Agree[PL], will militate against dorsal segments and non-homorganic adjacent segments respectively, incurring violations for sequences like [kʰi], which feature a dorsal followed by a coronal. To account for an input [kʰi] surfacing as [tʲʰi:] and not [kʰo:], the faithfulness constraint Ident[V], which demands that a vowel in the output be identical to a vowel in the input, will be crucially ranked above *Dors and Agree[PL]. Additionally, a local conjunction of the faithfulness constraint Ident[Dors] and the markedness constraint *[+round] will be ranked above Ident[V] to prevent the [k] in the example [kry:pə] (“crawl” infinitive) from undergoing palatalization. Furthermore, the data will refute the claim made by Jun (1995) and Mohanan (1993) that marked undergoers of assimilation do not exist, and will illustrate that velar palatalization in Altai Plautdietsch is a valid markedness diagnostic.