

LINGUISTIC CONVERGENCE IN THE VOLGA AREA

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The Middle Volga region presents a complex situation of language contacts. It is thought to be a convergence area in which different languages of adjacent speech communities have developed increasingly more common properties and thus come to resemble each other to a considerable degree. Contact-induced processes are supposed to have led to phenomena typical of a linguistic area in the sense of a so-called 'Sprachbund'.

The main protagonists in this drama belong to two genetic groups, Finno-Ugric and Turkic. The modern languages Mari (Cheremis), Udmurt (Votyak), and Mordva represent the Finno-Ugric side. Mari and Mordva belong to the Volgaic subgroup, though they are rather different from each other. Udmurt belongs to the Permic subgroup. On the Turkic side we find Tatar, Bashkir, and Chuvash. Tatar and Bashkir are closely related languages of the Kipchak branch of Turkic. Chuvash, the descendant of Volga Bulgar and the only living representative of the Bulgar branch of Turkic, deviates a good deal from other known kinds of Turkic. And there is of course a further protagonist, Russian, an Indo-European language that has dominated the area during the last centuries.

Adoption and imposition

We are confronted with many questions regarding this linguistic area. First, a few more languages, Komi (Komi-Zyryan), Nenets, and Kalmyk, are sometimes included into the relevant language complex (Décsy 1973). Secondly, the alleged 'Sprachbund' is based on varying criteria. Thirdly, numerous details concerning the interaction of the languages are obscure. How did the languages of the area acquire their shared features? To what extent are the observable similarities due to mutual influence, to common substrata or to original typological affinities?

It is my contention that there are no simple answers to these questions. The areal convergence is due to complex combinations of copying processes. Deeper and more detailed knowledge of the history of the languages concerned will help unravel the inter-tangled contact situations. We must reckon with the emergence of shared features that did not exist in any of the languages prior to the contacts between them, changes that would not have taken place in any of them without these contacts. But it would be a mystification to claim that there are no source

languages for regional innovations of the 'Sprachbund' type, i.e. that a shared feature cannot be related to any triggering factor in the individual languages.

The similarities observed may have different backgrounds. Successful reconstructions largely depend upon correct analyses of so-called borrowing processes between languages, i.e. copying of elements from one code to another in two-language contact situations. One of the crucial distinctions necessary when discussing copying is the difference between ADOPTION and IMPOSITION. In the case of adoption, speakers of a primary code adopt (or 'take over') copies from a dominant code. This is traditionally referred to as 'borrowing' and 'calque'. In the case of imposition, speakers of a primary code insert (or 'carry over') copies of their own code into their variety of a dominant code. Imposition is observed in various kinds of bilingual situations and does not necessarily imply language shift in the sense of giving up the primary code. CODE SHIFT means that a primary code is not maintained, but given up in favor of a dominant one. This may in principle occur without any appreciable imposition. But if imposition does take place, the abandoned code remains operative as 'substratum influence'.

Adoption and imposition are thus unidirectional convergence phenomena of two different kinds. The distinction is important in order to determine the origin and development of shared features in linguistic areas. I will briefly discuss one highly problematic case of convergence, in which the distinction between adopting and imposing may have played a crucial role: the question of the widespread phonological lax vs. tense oppositions of vowels in the Volga region.

Lax vowels

So-called reduced vowels, which form oppositions with so-called full vowels, are claimed to be a shared feature of typological importance in the area. They are found in several languages, e.g. Kazan Tatar, Mishar Tatar, Mountain Bashkir, Lowland Bashkir, Chuvash, Mari, Moksha Mordva, and Khanty, an Ob'-Ugric language spoken in west Siberia. As a rule, the full vowels are ordinary vowels in terms of length, whereas reduced vowels are described as markedly short. The oppositions are mostly not purely quantitative. As may be expected, the tenseness differences are often combined with qualitative differences to the effect that the lax vowels are centralized. Thus, the 'front' ones are front-to-central; the 'back' ones are back-to-central. As a general rule, it may be claimed that the lax vowels are reduced in length, but not necessarily in quality.

For example, Tatar and Bashkir have the following vowel phonemes. The so-called mid vowels are the lax ones: a front unrounded ϵ , a front rounded $\check{\epsilon}$, a back unrounded \check{i} , and a back rounded \check{o} .

	Front		Back	
High	i	ü	ĩ	u
Mid	ě	ǒ	ĩ	õ
Low	e		a	

As we will see, it is difficult to determine the origin of the areal phenomenon of lax vowels. Significant differences between the vowel systems will, however, show us that some features may have developed as a result of adaptation, whereas others can only be seen as products of imposition.

Distribution

Before discussing this and other problems, it is necessary to look at the distribution of languages in this multinational region. Note that the linguistic groups in question are never limited to the republics carrying their names, Bashkortostan, Tatarstan, Udmurtia, Mari El, Chuvashia, and Mordvinia. The Finno-Ugric languages are, as a rule, spoken in areas where Turkic dialects are also represented.

- Bashkir is the easternmost language, spoken from southern Ural area and westwards, mainly in the Kama basin. Bashkortostan borders on Tatarstan and Udmurtia.
- Tatar dialects are distributed over a huge territory in the middle of the European part of the Russian Federation. Tatarstan borders on Bashkortostan in the east, Mari El and Udmurtia in the north, and on Chuvashia in the west.
- Chuvash, the generally accepted descendant of Volga Bulgar, is spoken in Chuvashia, on the middle course of Volga, but also in Tatarstan, the Kuybyshev region, and Bashkortostan. Its main dialect groups are Upper Chuvash in the north of the republic and Lower Chuvash in the south and outside Chuvashia. Chuvashia borders on Tatarstan, Mordvinia, and Mari El.
- Mari is spoken in Mari El, on the middle course of Volga, by groups in the east of the Kama region, etc. One main variety is Hill Mari, spoken in the northwest of Mari El, on the right bank south of the Volga bend, in Upper Chuvash neighborhood, in northern Chuvashia, etc. Meadow Mari is the variety of the compact settlement area of Mari El, on the left Volga bank. Eastern Mari is spoken by groups in Bashkortostan, Tatarstan, Udmurtia, and other regions.
- Udmurt is spoken in Udmurtia, between Vyatka and Kama, but also in Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, Mari El, etc.
- Mordva is the westernmost language, spoken by scattered groups across a huge territory west and also east of Volga. Mordvinia borders on Chuvashia. The Moksha dialect is spoken mainly in the western part of Mordvinia, and the rather different Erzya dialect in the northeast and east.

Mutual influence

Different kinds of mutual influence have been suggested in earlier studies. The Finno-Ugric languages are claimed to be heavily influenced by Turkic. The impact on Udmurt vocabulary and syntax mainly comes from neighboring Tatar dialects. The contacts with Chuvash have been limited: Udmurt exhibits rather few Chuvash loanwords. The Turkic influence on Mordva also comes from neighboring Tatar dialects. Mordva, particularly the Erzya variety, contains numerous Tatar loanwords. Its contacts with Chuvash have been relatively unimportant.

The Turkic impact on Mari is considerable. Mari has a large number of Turkic loanwords, a number of copied bound morphemes, verb-final word order, extensive use of nonfinite verb forms, postverbal constructions (converbs + auxiliary verbs) to express actional modifications, an interrogative particle *mo*, etc. Large-scale copying has endowed Mari with a typological habitus similar to that of a Turkic language (Comrie 1981: 102).

The transformation is obviously due to widespread bilingualism of Mari groups in the contact areas. Meadow Mari dialects spoken in direct neighborhood of Tatar dialects have been subject to strong Tatar influences. The Volga Kipchak impact on Eastern Mari has been particularly heavy: lexical copying, phonetic influence, vowel harmony in closed syllables, copies of derivational suffixes, postpositions, the superlative particle *en* 'most', etc. On the other hand, there has been a massive Chuvash influence on western Mari dialects. Numerous lexical elements, word-formation suffixes, and syntactic patterns have been copied.

The Finno-Ugric influence on Turkic is usually exemplified by Mari influence on Chuvash. Mari has undoubtedly been of eminent importance for the development of Chuvash. The impact on Upper Chuvash is most evident. But there are less than 300 identified Mari loanwords in Chuvash, much less than the amount of Chuvash loanwords in Mari.

Volga Kipchak has not only exerted influence on Finno-Ugric dialects of the area, but also on Chuvash, most strongly on Lower Chuvash. For example, numerous Tatar loanwords have been adopted.

Finally, there is an immense and at the same time structurally superficial Russian influence on all varieties of the area. A flood of Russian words and international lexical elements mediated by Russian has affected the higher registers, in particular the styles of mass media and science. More importantly, Russian dominance has led numerous minority groups living among Russian majorities, e.g. many Mordva groups, to abandon their native language and shift to Russian as their primary code.

At first sight, then, the 'Sprachbund' issue seems to boil down to a strong Volga Kipchak influence on all varieties of the area plus a special Chuvash-Mari

symbiosis. The Kipchak dominance is strongest in the Udmurt, Meadow Mari, and Erzya varieties spoken in the immediate Tatar neighborhood.

Varying dominance relations

However, simple enumeration of copied elements does not solve the problems involved in the convergence processes. In order to reconstruct the drama of convergence attention must be paid to the different situations of dominance: the varying roles the speaker groups have played in relation to each other. The social dominance relations between the codes can be indicators of what kinds of copying processes have taken place. The Volga-Kama area has experienced a complex interplay of adoption and imposition processes of socially dominated and dominant codes. The sociolinguistic role of most of the codes involved has changed from dominant to dominated.

The Finno-Ugric languages involved are regarded as autochthonous in the region. Though smaller Turkic-speaking groups may have arrived earlier, the first significant Turkic element entered in the 8th century, when Bulgar groups moved from the steppes and occupied both sides of the Volga north of the Samara bend (Zimonyi 1992). The Volga Bulgars came to dominate various Finno-Ugric tribes of the Volga-Kama region, e.g. the ancestors of the Mari, Mordva and Udmurt. The Mari settlements belonged to their sphere of influence from the 9th century on. At end of the 9th century they founded a strong empire which included vast territories: present-day Chuvashia, Mari El, Udmurtia, Tatarstan, western Bashkortostan, and further regions. Two points are important for the linguistic development: First, the Bulgar state was a strong and rich empire of high cultural prestige and with a socially dominant language. Secondly, up to the 13th century, Bulgar tribes seem to have assimilated several Finno-Ugric groups living among them.

The scene changed in the 13th century with the Mongol invasion, the fall of Volga Bulgaria and the establishment of the Golden Horde. Kipchak Turkic tribes had already lived in the Bulgar Empire, but now the role of the Kipchak groups became much more important since they constituted the main force of the victorious army. Kipchaks began to infiltrate the former Bulgar territories. One part of the Bulgars fled to the Russians, another part retired to today's Chuvashia, and the rest remained in their old settlements, where they were later assimilated. As for the Mari, the Meadow Mari region was part of the Golden Horde, whereas the Hill Mari, who in that period settled farther west and northwest, were more or less dependent on the Moscow principality.

After the disintegration of the Golden Horde in the early 15th century and the emergence of the Kazan Khanate, the population of the area was largely Kipchakized, i.e. acquired the language that later developed into Tatar and Bashkir. Kipchak gained ground among the peoples of the Volga region. Some groups,

such as the Mordva, attempted to evade the Tatar by migrating. A merger of Kipchaks, Bulgars, and Finno-Ugrians led to the emergence of the ethnic group of Kazan Tatars. Again, two points are important for the linguistic development: First, the Golden Horde and the Kazan Khanate were strong and rich states of high cultural prestige. Kipchak, which became its official language, had a socially dominant status, and Bulgar Turkic lost its former status. Secondly, Kazan and Mishar Tatars assimilated ethnic minorities of the region: Kipchak groups of other origins, Volga Bulgars, and Finno-Ugric tribes. Kazan Tatars came to play the leading role in the region as the politically and economically dominant group. Kazan Tatar, the language of the central part of the former Volga Bulgaria, exerted a strong influence on Chuvash, Bashkir, Meadow Mari, Mordva, Udmurt and other languages.

The languages of the area got into contact with Russian at different times, depending on the distance of their territories to Moscow. The Russian influence is oldest and strongest in the west: in Mordva and Hill Mari. When the Khanate of Kazan fell in 1552, the whole Volga-Kama region was annexed to Russia. Russian influence on Tatar, Chuvash, Mari, Mordva, Udmurt and other languages increased rapidly.

In the 17th and 18th centuries, the Russian colonization and the settlement of Russian peasants in the north and northwest split up the linguistic regions. For example, many Chuvash left their country in the 17th century. Some came to inhabit the southern regions of today's Chuvashia, and others went eastwards and thus came into contact with Tatar and Bashkir groups. The Mari were split up in the 18th century following the migration of Meadow Mari groups into the Ural region. The Mordva also attempted to escape Russian domination by migrating. The linguistic influence of Russian was relatively weak in pre-Revolutionary times. The massive lexical influence started in the Soviet era. The main linguistic result of the Russian dominance was language shift among many minorities.

Non-Kipchakized areas

What was the origin and early development of the Chuvash? Their ancestors lived on the right bank of Volga, in the northern part of today's Chuvashia, close to the Bulgar center on the other side of the Volga. It is obvious that Bulgar-speaking newcomers absorbed certain Mari groups in this region. A specific culture with Bulgar and Finno-Ugric elements developed, which also affected the neighboring Mordva, Mari, and Udmurt. After long processes of assimilation, a Chuvash ethnic unity seems to have emerged by the 15th century. At this time, the Chuvash territory became a part of the Khanate of Kazan.

Large Mari groups had moved to the north and northeast. There is nothing to prove that the Mari inhabited their present-day homeland on the left Volga bank before the mid-13th century (Bereczki 1994: 14-16). After their settlement in this

region, the dissolution of the ancient Mari unity and the dialectal differentiation began.

It is a remarkable fact that a Bulgar variety was preserved on the right Volga bank, whereas the Bulgars on the left bank were Kipchakized. Both under the Golden Horde and the Khanate of Kazan, Kipchak exerted a strong impact on Chuvash, but the Kipchak dominance did not lead to any code shift. The Chuvash escaped Kipchak assimilation. Neither were they converted to Islam. Though a Muslim mission had been active among the Finno-Ugric and early Kipchak tribes under Bulgar control, Islam had not reached all parts of the Volga-Kama area. Thus the Mari, Mordva, and Udmurt had remained pagans. The Bulgar-speaking ancestors of Chuvash obviously did not belong to the Bulgars who had adopted Islam. Later on, the Muslim culture of the Tatars gained ground among the Chuvash and the Finno-Ugric peoples of the region, but these peoples did not adopt Islam.

Kinds of copying

Certain conclusions can be drawn from these historical data. They suggest various asymmetrical relations between sociolinguistically dominated or 'weak' codes and dominant or 'strong' codes, i.e. fluctuating dominance relations in the course of the long-term contacts in the area.

First, Bulgar elements were adopted in Finno-Ugric varieties. Bulgar was not a substratum, whose features were imposed on them. There is a considerable stock of Bulgar loanwords in Mari. Udmurt and Mordva also have a larger number of Bulgar loanwords, whereas Komi (Zyryan) only displays two or three dozen words of Bulgar origin. Early Bulgar loanwords are found in both Meadow and Hill Mari; several hundred lexical items were copied up to the 13th century. It is important to note that they are typically words of material and social culture, as we would expect in the case of adoption from a prestigious code. After the 13th century the lexicon of Hill and Meadow Mari developed differently due to different language contacts. From this time on, Chuvash loanwords are mainly found in Hill Mari.

Secondly, Kipchak elements were adopted in practically all varieties of the area. Some were subject to a very strong Kipchak lexical and morphosyntactic influence. As regards Mari, the impact was strongest on Eastern Mari and Meadow Mari; as for Chuvash, it particularly affected Lower Chuvash.

Thirdly, Russian elements were adopted in all languages of the area. As in the first two cases, this influence was typically restricted to adoption of copies from a socially dominant code.

But we must also reckon with several cases of imposition, convergent changes due to complex processes of ethnolinguistic assimilation in the area. Thus early imposition of Finno-Ugric elements on Bulgar varieties is highly probable. There

was also Bulgar and Finno-Ugric imposition on the Kipchak varieties that many groups shifted to from the 14th century on. Finally, elements of all varieties of the area were imposed on the respective local varieties of Russian, in particular with respect to pronunciation.

The prehistory of some Turkic varieties of the area is likely to have involved changes due to abrupt reorganization processes, when various ethnic groups using different codes were brought together to coexist in new confederations and other mixed speech communities with new social networks.

The Chuvash-Mari symbiosis

Chuvash and Mari present the most intriguing interactions in the area. The contacts between them have been extremely close, leading to a profound symbiosis. But the nature of their mutual copying processes is still far from clear. The ‘direction of borrowing’ is often problematic: it is difficult to identify shared features as copies from Mari in Chuvash or copies from Chuvash in Mari.

In what way has Chuvash been subject to the strong influence from Mari? Some problems appear less puzzling if we reckon with large-scale imposition of Mari elements in Chuvash as against the well-known adoption of Chuvash elements in Mari. This would imply that the Finno-Ugric influence on Chuvash is essentially a substratum influence due to assimilation of segments of a local Finno-Ugric population by Bulgar-speaking immigrants. The Finno-Ugric groups in question imposed features of their primary code on their variety of Bulgar – thus an example of transfer of structures in the course of second-language acquisition.

The Finno-Ugric substratum of Chuvash is obvious. The influence is typically strongest in Upper Chuvash, especially in the Sundyr dialect spoken in the northwestern part of Chuvashia, in immediate Mari neighborhood. As toponyms show, Upper Chuvash largely covers the area formerly inhabited by the Mari population. Russian 16th-century sources refer to both Chuvash and Hill Mari as ‘the mountain people’, since they settled in the hilly region along the right Volga bank. Until the end of the 18th century, the Chuvash were often called ‘Cheremis’, the old name for the Mari, or ‘Cheremis Tatars’. Chuvash was long mistaken for a Finno-Ugric or a Turkicized Finno-Ugric language.

Lexical copies

It is not the aim of the present article to discuss the differences between adopted and imposed features in detail. With respect to loanwords, it may be enough to state that possible semantic constraints on lexical copying are likely to differ between adoption and imposition. In cases of adoption, speakers naturally tend to copy words that reflect the very aspects by which the culture of the dominant code is dominant. In cases of imposition, speakers prefer the basic vocabulary of

semantic domains left untouched by these aspects. Typically, Mari loanwords in Chuvash are not items reflecting a prestigious social or material culture, but include basic every-day vocabulary such as *kātkā* 'ant', *lāk* 'corner', *lām* 'dew, moisture', *lēp* 'lukewarm', and *mēlke* 'shadow'.

The origin of lax vowels

In order to illustrate the difference between adoption and imposition, let us take a brief look at the phenomenon of lax vowels, which is most instructive in this respect. We have already seen that Tatar and Bashkir have four of them. This is also the case in Upper Chuvash: *ě*, *ǔ*, *ǎ*, *ǝ*, though certain southern dialects lack *ǔ*. Lower Chuvash and Standard Chuvash only exhibit *ě* and *ǎ* due to delabialization of *ǔ* and *ǝ*. In some Tatar dialects, partly also in Kazan, *ǔ* and *ǝ* have developed to *ě* and *ĩ* similarly to Lower Chuvash. The northwestern dialects of Mari display, like Upper Chuvash, four lax vowels, a front unrounded *ě*, a front rounded *ǔ*, a back unrounded *ǎ*, and a back rounded *ǝ*. Hill Mari, like Lower Chuvash, only exhibits two lax vowels: one front unrounded *ě*, and one back unrounded *ǎ*. Most Meadow Mari dialects only have one lax vowel, a back unrounded *ǎ*. Moksha exhibits a centralized lax vowel that is absent in Erzya. The Vakh dialect of the west Siberian language Khanty has, again, four lax vowels: front unrounded, front rounded, back unrounded, and back rounded.

How did these lax vowels emerge? Several researchers have proposed a Finno-Ugric origin. Some have regarded the reduced vowels of Mari and Khanty as preserved properties of the Finno-Ugric proto-language (Steinitz 1944). Others have rejected the idea of a connection of the reduced vowels in Mari and Khanty with reduced vowels in first syllables in the proto-language. Some researchers have claimed that the reduced vowels in Mari are the result of inner development; others ascribe them to Turkic influence, since they mainly occur in Chuvash and Tatar loanwords, seldom in native words. On the other hand, it is claimed that the phonological system of Chuvash is strongly influenced by the neighboring Finno-Ugric languages. The vowel systems of Mari and Chuvash are very similar. Some researchers have even supposed an areal connection with the Russian *akan'e*, originally a typically Southern Russian innovation, e.g. reduction of unstressed *o* in words such as [vʌdá] *voda* 'water'. There have been attempts to explain this tendency as a Moksha influence (Stipa 1952). Some have reversed the direction of copying, suggesting that the reduction in Moksha might be due to influence from Russian as represented by the central dialect of the Moscow region.

Since the lax vs. tense oppositions are rather old in Volga Kipchak, some researchers have suggested a Kipchak origin. Thus the reduced vowels in initial syllables in Mari would be a result of Kipchak influence. Others assume a Bulgar origin, claiming that the point of departure was Volga Bulgar of the 13th and 14th centuries. From here, the phenomenon spread eastwards to Volga Kipchak.

Some scholars find it impossible to state anything certain about the origin of this feature, which is part of a sound change extending across a vast area. The phenomenon is simply claimed to be of 'areal' origin and typical of a 'Sprachbund', a shared areal property for which, as it were, none of the languages involved can be held responsible.

The question of origin will not be dealt with further here. Several facts point to a Bulgar origin, though the evidence is scarce. Volga Bulgar is a little known language to which various kinds of peculiar features may be attributed without much risk of falsification. The point I will make is different. It makes little sense to focus on the occurrence of individual lax vowels without considering their roles in the respective sound systems. And I will argue that Volga Kipchak and Chuvash represent two different cases with respect to the roles of lax vowels in the given systems.

The Volga Kipchak vowel shifts

It is a well-known and much discussed fact that the Turkic languages of the Volga-Kama area have undergone chain shifts of earlier high and non-high vowels. Here I limit the discussion to the situation in initial, primary stem syllables. The high and mid vowels of modern Tatar are likely to have emerged in the following way:

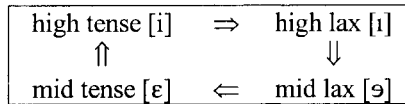
	Front		Back	
High	i	ü		u
	↑	↑		↑
	*e	*ö		*o
	*i	*ü	*ı	*u
	↓	↓	↓	↓
Mid	ě	ö	ı	ö

Most Turkic languages have preserved the asterisked vowels. The new Volga Kipchak system implies that a new opposition of lax vs. tense has replaced the earlier oppositions of high vs. mid. The old mid vowels rise; the old high vowels relax. The Turkic etymological relations are preserved, which means that there are regular correspondences between Tatar and other Common Turkic languages such as *it* vs. *et* 'meat', *kür-* vs. *kör-* 'see', *yul* vs. *yol* 'way', *běl-* vs. *bil-* 'know', *köl* vs. *kül* 'ashes', *qış* vs. *qış* 'winter', *qört* vs. *qurt* 'worm'. For details, see, e.g. Berta 1989.

Note that the Volga Kipchak shift was not simply a switch in the sense of falling high vowels and rising mid vowels. The tense vowels in Tatar are not necessarily higher than the lax ones. It is true that *i* is higher than the high-mid *ě*, but *ü* and *u* are not higher than *ö* and *ö* (Bajčura 1959: 33-38).

I will not go into the long and controversial discussion on reasons for the vowel shifts, their possible origin, and their relative and absolute chronology. I will not discuss the impact of accent, the neutralization of the Proto-Turkic length distinctions in vowels, or the role of heterogeneous diphthongs, vowel glides with an audible change of quality (Johanson 1992). But let us suppose that it was Volga Bulgar that started the engine in the area. The effect was crucially different in Volga Kipchak and in Chuvash.

Whatever the origin and development of the Volga Kipchak system may be, the switch is regular and systematic. It preserves the inherited Turkic vowel correlations, albeit in a somewhat different garb. And it is clearly part of a natural cycle of the following type, exemplified here with unrounded front vowels in IPA notation:



The common point of departure had been a phonetic approximation of high and mid vowels to the effect that the security distance between them became narrow. The distinction ±high, which is of crucial importance in Turkic phonology, was endangered. Volga Kipchak preserved the distinction by analogous, though materially different phonetic means. Phonological confusion was avoided. Old phonemes left their slots, but their neighbors moved in after them. The chain reaction gradually influenced the whole system in a clear-cut way: the old correlation, so essential in Turkic, was now reinterpreted and expressed by means of tense and lax vowels. The etymological relations largely remained intact. Thus the Volga Kipchak system is clearly motivated by internal principles of Turkic phonology.

The Chuvash vowel shifts

The situation is quite different in Chuvash, the supposed direct heir of Volga Bulgar. The developments of the vowels in Volga Kipchak and Chuvash are often described as basically identical. But the Chuvash deviations from the normal Turkic vowel system are very different from those in Tatar and Bashkir. If we assume a similar original vowel system as for the ancestor of Volga Kipchak, we find that both earlier high and mid vowels may be represented as high or as lax.

Some examples (with modern Common Turkic equivalents in brackets): *ãš* 'interior' (*ič*), *ěš*- 'drink' (*ič*-), *kun* 'day' (*kün*), *kul*- 'laugh' (*kül*-), *kěl* 'ashes' (*kül*), *xir* 'field' (*qır*), *xěr* 'girl' (*qız*), *tıt*- 'hold' (*tut*-), *păr* 'ice' (*buz*), *xurt* 'worm' (*qurt*), *kur*- 'see' (*kör*-), *vil*- 'die' (*öl*-), *kāk* 'root' (*kök*), *xur*- 'put' (*qoy*-), *tăxăr* 'nine' (*toquz*). The realization of primary stem vowels may also change according to the word structure, which is most unusual in Turkic, e.g. *vil*- 'die' (*öl*-) vs.

vĕler- 'kill' (*ölür-*) or *pis* 'boil' (*piš-*) vs. *pĕšer-* 'let boil, cook' (*pišir-*). See also Clark 1998. For details of the Common Turkic vowel system, see Johanson 1998.

The question how the Chuvash vowels have reached their present positions will not concern us here. There is rather little direct evidence of the Volga Bulgar vowel system. However, highly competent and trustworthy specialists in Turkic and Finno-Ugric historical linguistics have attempted to reconstruct older stages of the vowel systems of Chuvash and Mari on the basis of phonetic reflexes in loanwords (see, e.g., Róna-Tas 1982, Rédei and Róna-Tas 1983, Bereczki 1992, Agyagási 1997 and 1998). Rather complicated developments have been suggested, for Chuvash even changes such as raising followed by reduction of originally non-high vowels, e.g. **o > *u > ǔ*. All details of these interesting discussions must be omitted here.

The important point here is that the new system does not mirror the oppositions defining the earlier vowel system generally assumed for Turkic. If the latter was really the starting-point for the Chuvash development, this development has not been systematic in the way observed in practically all other Turkic languages. The old distinction high vs. non-high has not been preserved; and it has not been replaced by any analogous distinction. The tense vs. lax opposition does not serve the same phonological purpose as in Volga Kipchak. The diachronic transparency is blurred; the etymological connections are broken. The problem of coinciding old high and non-high vowels has become unimportant, the whole system being reorganized regardless of the old correlations.

Chuvash displays similar disloyalty with respect to old front vs. back relations. Many Turkic primary stems that are either front or back in a rather constant way from language to language are subject to class shift in Chuvash. There is thus a further dimension in which diachronic relations are disturbed and etymological connections blurred. Synchronically, however, the front versus back distinction still plays a crucial role, particularly in intersyllabic and intrasyllabic sound harmony.

Finno-Ugric imposition on Chuvash

The phonological comparison with the 'normal' Turkic languages Tatar and Bashkir is highly revealing. It is not enough to state that the vowel shifts in question are local phenomena that are also found in the Finno-Ugric languages of the region. In my opinion the deviations in Chuvash can only be explained by Finno-Ugric imposition. This means that speakers of ancient Mari (and probably also Permic) carried over their articulatory habits into their variety of Volga Bulgar. The phonological word structure of Turkic was alien to those speakers. Thus the tense vs. lax features were preserved or reorganized under Finno-Ugric substratum influence, i.e. distributed according to the position in the word and to non-Turkic accent patterns. Even if the tense vs. lax opposition originates in Volga

Bulgar, these specific realizations seem to be the effects of Finno-Ugric imposition. The opinion that Chuvash is a 'typically Turkic language' displaying only minor deviations from Common Turkic is as wrong as the old opposite opinion according to which Chuvash is a Turkicized Finno-Ugric language.

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