Well-formed branching onsets in Modern and Old Czech

Modern Czech (MCz) displays a very clear divide in the behaviour of word-final TR clusters (T=obstruent, R=sonorant) in Nsg and Gpl: while the former do not vocalize, the latter always do. Compare e.g. bratr "brother Nsg" with játr-a – jater "liver Npl, Gpl". In other Slavic languages such as Polish and Russian, both paradigms occur, i.e. with vocalized (Pol(ish) srebr-o – sreber "silver Nsg, Gpl", Ru(ssian) vedr-ó – vēder "bucket Nsg, Gpl") or unvocalized TR (Pol siōstr-a – siōstr "sister Nsg, Gpl", Ru igr-á – igr "game Nsg, Gpl"). Note that etymological yers cannot predict the vocalization patterns in any of the languages mentioned.

The MCz Nsg-Gpl contrast is not only observed for identical clusters, but also for clusters of the same root: compare e.g. Petr "Peter Nsg, masc" with Petr-a – Peter "Nsg, Gpl, fem". This difference in behaviour is intriguing in as much as both case markers are zero on the surface.

In order to tackle this puzzle, we look at the situation in Old Czech (OCz) and its evolution in MCz regarding the behaviour of word-final branching onsets. In OCz, both Nsg and Gpl show perfectly uniform behaviour: TR# in either morphological environment do not vocalize. Compare e.g. bobr "beaver Nsg" with žebr-o – žebr "rib Nsg, Gpl" (MCz žebr-o - žeber).

In order to see whether this situation that textbooks report for OCz is real, we studied the exhaustive output of a search for TR# in the electronic version of the OCz dictionaries featured on the website http://vokabular.ujc.cas.cz. We distinguish TR# in Nsg (157 words attested in the dictionaries), Gpl (23 words attested in OCz texts) and short forms of adjectives (9 words attested in OCz texts).

We show that indeed none of the three morphological situations produces vocalized TR#. The only exception is hR#, which undergoes systematic vocalization in both Nsg (e.g. uher, uhr-a "pimple Nsg, Gsg" < CS ǫgr-ъ; uhel, uhel-a "coal Nsg, Gsg" < CS ǫgl-ъ) and Gpl (jáhl-y, jáhel "millet Npl Gpl; Uhr-y, Uher "Hungary Npl, Gpl"). We argue that hR# was an ill-formed word-final cluster in OCz because /h/ could not sustain a branching onset relationship with a following sonorant.

The evolution from OCz where TR# were unvocalized in Gpl to MCz where they systematically vocalize coincides with a change of status of the sonorants involved: from OCz to MCz, trapped sonorants (i.e. non-syllabic Rs in #RT, TRT or TR#) disappeared altogether (except word-initially as in monosyllabic MCz lhát "to lie" and trapped /ť/ as in bisyllabic MCz hřbitov "graveyard"), to become syllabic. All TR# examined were trapped in OCz and thus should have become syllabic in MCz. This is indeed what happened in Nsg (in OCz bratr is monosyllabic, while it is bisyllabic in MCz). But in Gpl they developed a vowel (Gpl OCz játr, MCz jater). There is thus reason to believe that the phonological exponent of Gpl is such that it prevented trapped TR# to become syllabic. In other words, what we seek to identify for the synchronic situation in MCz is the particular property of the exponent of Gpl (which is zero on the surface) that prevents sonorants in TR# to be(come) syllabic.