

LESSON 2

THE PHONOLOGY (SOUND SYSTEM) OF AVESTAN. GENERAL REMARKS.

One of the things that strikes one about Avestan as opposed to Old Indic (Sanskrit) is the seemingly chaotic orthography. The cause of this state was long thought to be that the Avestan text had been corrupted by the manuscript writers, and scholars therefore decided that the text had to be “corrected” and “normalized” in order to recapture the “original” Avestan text. They never proved their point by examining in detail the orthography and the individual characteristics of the manuscripts, however.

The first Western scholar to undertake a complete analysis of the phonology of Avestan was G. Morgenstierne, who in an article written during World War II and published in 1942 showed that the Avestan alphabet reflected an internally consistent phonological system, in many respects similar to those of living Iranian dialects and languages. Most of the seemingly orthographic aberrations, which at the time were commonly explained as scribal errors, could be explained in terms of the phonological system of the language(s) of the Avesta.

It must be kept in mind, however, that the Avestan texts as we have them do not necessarily in every detail reflect a genuine linguistic system. For centuries they were adjusted by editors (diascevaists) and then by scribes who spoke dialects or languages with phonological systems differing fundamentally from that of the original Avestan language. Thus, on one hand, the Old Avestan texts contain many elements that are clearly borrowed from or influenced by Young Avestan, and, on the other hand, the Young Avestan texts contain both elements that are imitations of Old Avestan (“pseudo-OAv.”) and elements belonging to later stages of Iranian that were probably introduced by the scribes.

It is, finally, almost impossible to determine which of the sound changes we observe in our extant manuscripts already belonged to the original language and which ones were introduced at various stages of the 1000-1500 years’ oral and written transmission of the texts. One way of determining early changes is to compare the Avestan phonological system with that of Old Indic.

As much of the transmission of the surviving Avesta probably took place in southwestern Iran, phonological changes shared with other East-Iranian languages as opposed to West-Iranian languages may be assumed to belong to the early period.

One such typically East-Iranian sound change is the shortening of *ī* and its disappearance in *juua-* “alive,” which agrees with Sogdian *žw-*, Khotanese *juva-*, and Pashto *žw-*, against OInd. *jīva-*; and in *cuuant-* “how great,” OInd. *kīvant-*.

Palatalization and labialization of vowels, however, which is typical of the transmitted Avestan text, are also found in western Iranian languages and do not necessarily belong to the eastern stage of the transmission.

Important:

Some students may find it useful to compare Sanskrit (Old Indic) when learning the Avestan grammar, but both they and the teachers should avoid phonetically “translating” the Avestan into Sanskrit to explain the Avestan forms. Such an approach not only hints at an “inferior” status of Avestan compared to Sanskrit but also—more importantly—may take the focus away from the linguistic structure of Avestan in its own right—its phonetic and grammatical systems and the indigenous semantic developments. In my own experience, students who routinely see the Sanskrit forms in the Avestan ones may experience great difficulties in identifying typically Avestan, especially “contracted,” forms.

The students are not expected to master completely the following description of the phonological system of Avestan right away but use it for reference.

PHONEMES

We call “phonemes” the smallest units of speech that distinguish meanings. Phonemes are usually determined by exhibiting “minimal pairs,” e.g., English *bad* ~ *sad*, a pair that establishes /b/ and /s/ as separate phonemes in English.

Phonemes are denoted by writing them between / /. **The phoneme is not a “sound”** (the sound that somebody produces and which we hear when somebody speaks) but a linguistic entity devised, as it were, to provide the theoretical link between acoustic **sound** (the “physical” aspect of speech) and **meaning** (the “psychological” aspect of speech).

When we want to emphasize that we are talking about the actual sound, or the “phonetic realization” of a phoneme, we use square brackets [], e.g., [p], [b], [z]. These actual sounds are also called “phones” or “allophones.”

Phonemes are described by listing their “distinctive features.” These distinctive features are descriptions of how the sound is produced in the mouth and which parts of the mouth are involved in the sound production. Following are some examples:

/b/: stop, labial, voiced ~ /p/: stop, labial, unvoiced, ~ /m/: nasal, labial.

/x/: fricative, velar, unvoiced ~ /ɣ/: fricative, velar, voiced.

/s/: sibilant, alveo-dental, unvoiced ~ /z/: sibilant alveo-dental, voiced ~ /ʃ/: sibilant, alveo-palatal, unvoiced ~ /ʒ/: sibilant, alveo-palatal, voiced.

Note that English *t* is sometimes aspirated [t^h], sometimes not aspirated [t]. The feature “aspiration” is not, however, distinctive in English or Avestan, so there is no phonemic opposition /t/ ~ /t^h/, /p/ ~ /p^h/, etc. In such cases we say that [p] and [p^h] are “allophones” of /p/. Aspiration *is* a distinctive feature in some languages—Sanskrit, for instance, where we have minimal pairs such as *kara* [kara] “hand” ~ *khara* [k^hara] “donkey.”

In the case of /n/ we note that “voiced” is not a distinctive feature of nasals in English or Avestan, as no two words can be distinguished by the presence or absence of voicing in a nasal /n/. On the other hand, Avestan has a voiceless or, probably, pre-aspirated [hm], which may be a separate phoneme: /m/ ~ /^hm/, but more probably it is simply an allophone of /m/ after *h* or alternative (short-hand) way of writing *hm*.

PHONEMIC NEUTRALIZATION

Phonemes may not be distinguished in all positions. Thus, in English we cannot find any minimal pairs distinguished by the phoneme sequences /st/ and /sd/. In such cases we say that the phonemic opposition between /t/ and /d/ has been neutralized after /s/.

VOWEL PHONEMES

Vowel phonemes are defined by features relating to the position of the tongue in the mouth and the shape of the lips. There are three basic parameters:

1. The height of the highest point of the tongue: *high* - *mid* - *low*.
2. The place of the highest point of the tongue: *front* - *central* - *back*.
3. Rounding or non-rounding of the lips.

In Avestan there are the additional features of *short* - *long* and of *nasalized* - *oral* (= non-nasalized), only some of which have distinctive function.

Diphthongs may be regarded as combinations of phonemes or single, composite, phonemes.

We may tentatively posit the following vowel (simple and diphthongs) phonemes for Young Avestan (spelling in <>):

LESSON 2

	Front	Central	Back, rounded	Nasal
High	i <i, ī>		u <u, ū>	
Mid	e <e, ē>	ə, ə̄ <ə, ə̄>	o <o, ō>	(ə̄ <ə̄> ?)
Low	a <a>	ā <ā>	ā <ā>, (ā̄ <ā̄>)	(ā̄ <ā̄> ?)
				ā̄ <ā̄>

Diphthongs:

Short		Long
ai <aē>	~ oi/əi <ōi>	āi <āi>
au <ao, aō>	~ ou <ou> ~ əu <əu>	āu <āu>

The difference between *ō* and *ā* must have been between closed and open [o: ~ ā:] (approximately as in English *home* ~ *hawk*, Germ. *rote* ~ *Rotte*).

Cf. the following minimal or almost minimal pairs:

- āpō* ~ *apō* “waters” nom. plur. ~ gen. sing., acc. plur.
- apō* ~ *apa* “water” gen. sing., acc. plur. ~ instr. sing.
- aməm* ~ *iməm* “the strength” ~ “this”
- apa* ~ *upa* “with water” ~ “up to, at”
- aspō* ~ *aspa* ~ *aspā* “horse” nom. sing. ~ instr. sing. ~ acc. plur.
- surō* ~ *surā* “rich in life-giving strength” masc. nom. sing. ~ fem. nom.-acc. plur.
- aēta* ~ *aēte* “this” instr. sing. ~ nom. plur.
- āiš* ~ *aēša* “with these” ~ “this (one)”
- gāuš* ~ *gaoš* ~ *gāuš* “cow” nom. ~ gen. ~ gen.
- parəna-* ~ *pərəna-* “feather” ~ “full”
- mašīia-* ~ *amāša-* “(mortal) man” ~ “immortal”
- kaša* ~ *°kaša* “armpit” ~ “-cutters”
- tē* ~ *tā* “they” and *haoma* ~ *haomā* “haoma” plur. nom. ~ acc.

The phonemic status of vowel length in the case of *i* and *ī*, *u* and *ū* is uncertain. Standard editions and grammars give the impression that the distribution of short and long *i* and *u* (in Young Avestan) is conditioned by phonetic context and that they are therefore in complementary distribution, but the distribution of *i* and *ī*, *u* and *ū* in the actual manuscripts has not been investigated in any detail, and from the studies that have been made (e.g., Hintze in JamaspAsa, 1991), it appears that the choice between *i* or *ī*, *u* or *ū* may be a matter of scribal preference. Thus, the distribution by phonetic context may be a mirage of Western editions and not supported by the manuscripts.

Note that in relatively modern Iranian manuscripts long *ū* is replaced by *ī*. Investigation of this phenomenon may help establish the correct distribution of *u* or *ū*.

In this manual, long *ī* and *ū* are used in final position in monosyllables only (*zī*, *nū*) and separated preverbs (*nī*.°, *vī*.°), as well as to indicate stem forms (*tanū-*, etc.), but in all other cases short *i* and *u* are used consistently (with a few exceptions in the reading exercises), in order to stress the fact that the choice of (Young) Avestan short or long *i* and *u* is not conditioned by their origins, such as Proto-Iranian short and long *i* and *u* or by their being contraction products (*-*im*, *-*īm*, and *-*ijam* all > -*im* or -*īm* and *-*um*, *-*ūm*, and *-*uṃam* all > -*um* or -*ūm*). Obviously, long *ī* and *ū* could also have been used.

The same caveat may to some extent apply to short and long *e* and *ē*, *o* and *ō*. Thus, in our standard editions, *ē* other than in monosyllabic words (see below), is restricted to the diphthong *aē*, while *ō*, other than as word final and composition vowel is only found before the morpheme border. Pairs such as *vohu* and *dāmōhu* do not, therefore necessarily prove a phonemic opposition *o* ~ *ō*. The distribution of *o* ~ *ō* also varies by manuscripts, however. Thus, many manuscripts have consistently *vōhu* instead of *vohu*, and for the diphthong *ao* many manuscripts commonly have *aō*.

VOCABULARY 2

- aēm, nom. sing. m. of ima-: this one, he
 aēša, nom. sing. m., f. of aēta-: this
 aēuua, nom. sing. f. of aēuua-: one (numeral)
 ahura-: lord
 Ahurō Mazdā, nom. sing. of Ahura- Mazdā-: Ahura Mazdā, literally: the omniscient lord
 ama-: force, strength
 amauua, nom. sing. m. of amauuaṅt-
 Amərətātāt-, amərətāt- f.: Non-dying, Immortality; name of the sixth Aməša Spənta
 Anāhite, voc. sing. of Anāhitā-: O Anāhita!
 aṅhu-, ahu-: existence, especially the new-born Ordered existence, generated by the sacrifice
 aṅra-: evil, destructive; the opposite of spənta-
 Aṅrō Maniiuš, nom. sing. of Aṅra- Mainiiu-: the Evil Spirit
 aspō, nom. sing. of aspa-: horse
 asti < ah-: is
 Ašəm Vahištəm: Best Order, the second of the Life-giving Immortals
 ašauuan- m.: sustainer of Order, Orderly
 auuaṅhe, dative sing. of auuah- n.: to (the) assistance (of)
 Ārmaiti- f.: Humility; Spəntā- Ārmaiti-, Life-giving Humility, the fourth of the Life-giving Immortals
 ātar-/āθr-: fire
 daēna, nom. sing., daēnaṃ, acc. sing. of daēnā-: a visionary sense of man, his “vision soul,” that after death
 assumes the form of a woman, beautiful or ugly according to the person’s thoughts, words, and acts in
 life, who leads the soul to paradise or hell, as the case may be
 daēuua-: old, evil god
 dāmōhu, locative plur. of dāman- n.: creature
 druj- f.: the cosmic Deception, the Lie
 druuaṅt-: possessed by the Lie, Lieful
 duuša-: to attack (? said of evil beings)
 duraošō, nom. sing. duraoša-: standing epithet of Haoma- of unknown meaning, traditionally interpreted as
 “death-averting”
 dušmatəm, nom.-acc. sing. n., dušmata, nom.-acc. plur. n. of dušmata-: badly thought (thought)
 dužuuaršta, nom.-acc. plur. n. of dužuuaršta-: badly done (deed)
 dužuxta, nom.-acc. plur. n. of dužuxta-: badly spoken (word)
 fraša-: Juicy, wonderful
 frašō.kərəiti- f.: Juicy-making, Renovation, the permanent reestablishment of the first existence after the
 final victory over the powers of evil and darkness
 gaēθiia-: belonging to/residing in the world of living beings,
 gao- m., f.: ox, cow; plur. cattle, animal species
 gāuš, nom. sing. of gao-
 haomō, nom. sing. of haoma-, Haoma-: the haoma plant and a god
 Hauruuaatāt- f.: Wholeness; the fifth of the Life-giving Immortals
 hauua, nom. sing. f. of hauua-: own
 humata, nom.-acc. plur. n. of humata-: well-thought (thought)
 huuaršta, nom.-acc. plur. n. of huuaršta-: well-done (deed)
 huxtəm, nom.-acc. sing. n., huxta, nom.-acc. plur. n. of huxta-: well-spoken (word)
 iməm acc. sing. m. < ima-: this
 jasa < jasa- √gam: come!
 juua: 1. nom. plur. m. of juua-: alive. — 2. imperative 2nd sing. of juua-: to live
 juuō, nom. sing. m. of juua-: alive
 kaša, nom. sing. of kašā-: armpit
 manah- n.: thought, mind

LESSON 2

maniiuuuā-, fem. maniiuuūī-: belonging to/residing in the world of thought
mašīia, nom. plur. of mašīia-
mazdā- m.: omniscient
māzdaiiasni-: of/belonging to the one who sacrifices to Ahura Mazdā (of the one who believes in Ahura Mazdā)
mē: to/for/of me
mošu: soon, quickly
nāman- or nāman- n.: name
nəmašīia-: to revere, do homage
nəmašīiāmahi < nəmašīia-: we revere, do homage
nurəm: now
ōim, acc. sing. m. of aēuuā-
paoiriiō.fraθβaršta, nom. plur. m., n. of paoiriiō.fraθβaršta-: first fashioned forth
parəna, nom.-acc. plur. of parəna- n.: feather
Pāuruuō, nom. sing. of Pāuruuā-
pərəna-: full
pouru, nom.-acc. sing. n. of pauru-: much
pouru.sarəda, nom. sing. f. of pouru.sarəda-: of many kinds
Rašnu-: Rashnu, divine judge who judges the soul's thoughts, words, and deeds on his scale
ratu-: (divine) model, prototype
saōšiiant-: revitalizer, said of the successful sacrificer, especially the last one, son of Zarathustra
spaēta, nom.-acc. plur. n. of spaēta-: white
Tištrīia-: Tishtrīia, god of the seasonal rains; the Dog Star, Sirius
upa: at, in (+ acc.)
vahištō, nom. sing. m. of vahišta-, vahišta- superlative of vaŋhu-: best
vahištō aŋhuš: the best existence, paradise
Vaiiu-: name of the god of the space between heaven and earth (note that heaven is spherical and the earth situated in the middle of the sphere)
vairīia-: well-deserved, commonly used of rewards
Vərəθraŋna-: name of the god of victory
Vohu Manō, nom. sing. of vohu- manah- n.: Good Mind, the first of of the Life-giving Immortals
xšaθra- n.: (royal) command
Xšaθrəm Vairim: Well-deserved Command, the third of of the Life-giving Immortals
yazata-: deserving of sacrifice, deity
Zaraθuštra-: name of the mythical first poet-sacrificer; protagonist of the Avesta
zaraθuštri-: Zarathustrian, in the tradition of Zarathustra, spoken by Zarathustra