

## The character of the Proto-Turkic initial #j-

Alexander Kitaev

Independent scholar; Moscow, Russia; e-mail: [dikobraz1983@gmail.com](mailto:dikobraz1983@gmail.com)

### Abstract

The question of the character of the initial Proto-Turkic #j- is one of the most debatable. Some scholars interpret it as a normal, typical sonorant, others raise objections and reconstruct it as an explosive or affricative (#ʒ- or #ʒ̣-). Both points of view have strengths and weaknesses and principally are equivalent; both types of change (#j- → #ʒ- / #ʒ̣- or #ʒ- / #ʒ̣- → #j-) are of the same force. Thus, the result of the argument based on the comparison of various common Turkic branches is a draw game. Only Chuvash data show us the interpretation of this sound as an explosive or affricative is more likely.

**Keywords:** comparative linguistics; Turkic languages; Chuvash language; proto-Turkic #j-; methodology of science

### 1. The kernel of the problem

The character of the proto-Turkic initial #j- is one of the most debatable questions. The widely accepted point of view is the interpretation of #j- like normal sonorant (Serebrennikov, Gadhieva 2009: 51 – 53). But some scholars prefer to interpret it as ʒ-, including O. A. Mudrak – a representative of the so-called Moscow tradition of comparative linguistics (Tenishev, Dybo 2006: 12 – 13). His explanation is based on the total lack of the initial sonorants in the Proto-Turkic language. A. V. Dybo – also a representative of the Moscow tradition, reconstructs non-sibilant #ʒ- and #j- as variants with a light preference of #j- (Dybo 2007: 27 – 32).

### 2. Draw game of the discussion

Both variants of the sound change (#j- → #ʒ- / #ʒ̣-; #ʒ- / #ʒ̣- → #j-) can be demonstrated in various languages.

#j- → #ʒ- / #ʒ̣-

In standard Italian the initial #j- and #dj- are always changed into #ʒ̣-.

- Latin *iam* “already” > *gia*
- Latin *iocus* “joke” > *gioco, giuoco*
- Latin *diurnus* “day” > *giorno*

In Hungarian the change #j- → #ʒ- is demonstrated in some stems, but in other initial #j- is preserved or omitted, the distribution is unclear:

- Finno-Ugric \**jalka* “foot”, “leg” → *gyalog* “on foot”
- Finno-Ugric \**jälke* “trace” → *jel*, but dial. *gyel* “signal”
- Finno-Ugric \**jänte* “string” → *ideg* “nerve”

In standard Spanish the initial stressed syllable *#ge-* is changed into *#je-*:

- Latin *gelu* “ice” → *hielo*.

In continental Scandinavian languages initial *#dj-*, *#gj-* can be pronounced as *#j-*:

- Swedish, Norwegian Bokmål *djup* “deep” [jup].

At the same time in Spanish initial *#j-* can be pronounced in various manners: *#j-*, *#z-*, *#ž-*, *#z’-* and even like voiceless: *#č-*, *#ś-* etc.

Thus, both points of view are principally equivalent. We can’t make a ‘correct choice’ here.

A Soviet / Russian turcologist A. M. Scherbak supposed the change of the voiceless consonant *\*#ǰ-* into *#j-* (Scherbak 1970: 79 — 80). This interpretation has never been totally accepted for Turkic and nowadays it is obsolete and totally rejected as a rather marginal theory. But almost the same change is supposed to be real for Chukchi-Koryak languages: many stems with initial *#j-* in Koryak and some in Chukchi are etymologized from the stems with initial *#ǰ-*, *#š-* or *#č-*: *\*čašjola* “fox” → Chukchi *jatjol*, Koryak *jajol* (Mudrak 2000; Mudrak 2013). Thus, *principally* even this change is possible, but not for Turkic languages.

Thus, in this discussion we face the situation of draw game. All versions can be proved by examples in various languages.

In terms of concrete phonetic variants the question of initial *#j-* is totally pointless. But we should find out the phonological status of *#j-*. How can we do it? Can we discover any trace?

### 3. Chuvash examples help us to clear up the question

The Chuvash language preserves the glide *-j-* or its traces in diphthongs. Initial *#j-* is preserved like *#j-*: *\*jāyir* “heavy” → *jivāʷr*.

The reflexes after consonants are different.

- *#sĭ-* → *#š-*: *\*sĭuw / sĭūw* “water” → *šiv*
- *#tĭ-, #dĭ-, #čĭ-* → *#č-*: *\*tĭāt / dĭāt* “stone” → *čul / čol*; *\*čĭāq* “time”, “measure” → *čux / čox*;
- *#qĭ-, #Gĭ-* (back vowel row) → *#xĭ-* → *#j-*: *\*qĭān* “blood” → *jun / jon*;
- *#kĭ-, #gĭ-* (front vowel row) → *#k’-*: *\*kĭül / gĭül* “inner porch”, “house”, “home” → *kil*
- *#pĭ-, #bĭ-* → *#p’-*: *\*bĭayir* “liver” → *pěver*

The standard reflexes of the initial #j- (#z-, #ž-) and, in most cases, č- (not before *ï* or *i*) are *ś*: \*čar “whetstone”, “sickle” > *śurla, śorla* ‘sickle’; \*jay- ‘to rain’, \*jajmur “rain” → *śu-, śumār / śomār*.

Two stems in Chuvash demonstrate us č instead of *ś*: *čěre* ‘heart’ (really labialized: *čě<sup>w</sup>re*) and the self-designation *čă<sup>w</sup>vaš*. The traditional reconstruction of the first stem is \*jürek, the second stem means “calm”, “peaceful” and is widespread in Turkic, the proto-form can be reconstructed as \*jawaŋa.

The explanation of the initial #č- in *čă<sup>w</sup>vaš* is absent.

In *čěre* (*čě<sup>w</sup>re*) the initial #č- can be analyzed as influenced by *čěrě* ‘alive’ (Tenishev, Dybo 2006: 837). This interpretation can hardly be accepted as sufficient.

The explanation of the Chuvash č instead of *ś* in both stems is simple and evident. We have already seen various reflexes of the glide #j- after initial consonants. Here we see the same. These are the examples of the historical glide -j- after #j-, the proto-forms of the stems are \*jürek and \*jawaŋa.

Here phonetically and phonologically the initial combination of the sonorant #j- and the glide -j- is impossible, it sounds almost like #jj-, double j in Proto-Turkic is impossible, especially in the very beginning. So, this \*jj- is pronounced like #zj- or #žj- in obligatory manner. Hereinafter the reflexes of #zj- or #žj- become the same as reflexes of #tj-, #dġ-, #čġ-.

The explanation of the initial #č instead of #ś in both stems is now received.

Phonologically the reconstructed stems are \*žjürek / \*zġürek and \*žjawaŋa / \*zġawaŋa.

Thus, we may reconstruct initial palatalized explosive \*#z or affricative \*#ž consonant instead of \*#j in all other positions.

Due to a big number of stems with initial #č- for reasons of systematic approach we prefer to reconstruct the initial \*#ž- as a voiced match of \*#č-: \*žay- “to rain”, \*žajmur “rain” (žay + the lost stem used as the suffix); \*žāt “age”, “year”; \*žē- “to eat” etc.

The phonological status of initial #j- as #ž- is demonstrated.

#### 4. Conclusion

The Proto-Turkic initial #j- phonologically can be reconstructed as #ž-. This reconstruction is based on the analysis of the distribution of Chuvash reflexes of it.

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