

On the Non-Representation of Nasals before Homorganic Obstruents in Alphabetic Scripts

Corinna Salomon

University of Vienna

corinna.salomon@univie.ac.at

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The talk discusses the omission of nasals before homorganic obstruents in writing on the basis of three case studies from among the alphabets of Greece, Italy, and the European continent, trying to outline methods and approaches which may allow us to answer the question whether this feature is a) independently phonetically based in all the scripts in which it appears, b) part of a continuous orthographic tradition which masks the phonetic realities of the underlying languages, or c) typologically widespread due to conditions which are yet to be determined.

The more or less systematic omission of characters for nasals in certain position occurs quite frequently in scripts for IE languages, including syllabic scripts like Hittite cuneiform as well as alphabetic ones, such as the Greek, Latin, Oscan, Umbrian and Lepontic alphabets, and the Runic script. It would seem obvious to assume phonetic reasons – for nasals before homorganic obstruents specifically the nasalisation of the preceding vowel and subsequent loss of the nasal segment. Yet there are scholars who argue that the non-representation of nasals cannot always be shown to be founded in phonetics, and that, in some scripts at least, it may be a purely orthographic convention. Thus, for Runic, this position is held by the proponents of the Mediterranean theory (e.g., Morris 1988), who claim that the Runic omission of nasals has no basis in Germanic phonetics, and who explain it as a spelling convention imported from archaic Greek. Yet the Greek evidence is not itself so easy to interpret – the very sporadic Attic evidence has been interpreted both as phonetically conditioned, and as an orthographic phenomenon (Méndez Dosuna 2007). In both Oscan and Umbrian writing, nasals are omitted before homorganic obstruents only in very specific circumstances, which are completely different in the two systems; it is hard to argue phonetic reasons for these data (Buck 1904).

While it is reasonable to suggest that an orthographic rule in the source alphabet would find its way into the new script even when it has no phonetic basis there, it is not evident how a spelling convention like this could have developed from a phonetic basis in the first place – at which point and by what mechanisms could the non-representation of nasals which are weakened to such an extent that they lose their status as segments be turned into a rule for the non-spelling of non-weakened segments? May conventions in syllabic scripts have influenced alphabetic ones, as proposed for Cypriote and alphabetic Greek writing by Woodard (1997), and then been faithfully passed on to various alphabets without a linguistic rationale? Or would we do better to take our epigraphic evidence at face value and try to explain the absence of nasals before homorganic obstruents as phonetically conditioned in all instances?

References: Buck, C.D. (1904). *A Grammar of Oscan and Umbrian*. Boston: Ginn. Méndez Dosuna, J. (2007). *Ex praesente lux*. In Ivo Hajnal (ed.), *Die altgriechischen Dialekte. Wesen und Werden*. Innsbruck: Institut für Sprachen und Literatur der Univ. Innsbruck, 355–384. Morris, R. L. (1988). *Runic and Mediterranean Epigraphy*. Amsterdam, Philadelphia: John Benjamins. Woodard, R.D. (1997). *Greek Writing from Knossos to Homer: An Interpretation of the Origin of the Greek Alphabet and the Continuity of Ancient Greek Literacy*. New York, Oxford: OUP.

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