Consonant insertion processes in Meto: typologically rare but diachronically explicable

This paper examines consonant insertion processes in the Meto language/dialect cluster of western Timor. One example of a consonant insertion process in Meto comes from the Amfo'an variety, whereby /ʤ/, /gw/ and /l/ are regularly inserted after vowel-final words when they are followed by a vowel-initial enclitic. Examples are given in (1).

(1) *ai* + *=ees* → *aiʤee* 'one fire' (Culhane 2018:32)
      noe + *=ee* → *noelees* 'one river'
      meo + *=ee* → *meogwees* 'one cat'
      hau + *=ee* → *haugwees* 'one tree'

In the Timaus variety of Meto, consonant insertion occurs in the same environment, though different consonants are inserted. Vowel assimilation also occurs in some cases. Examples are given in (2).

(2) *ai* + *=ees* → *aarees* 'one fire'
      noe + *=ees* → *noelees* 'one river'
      meo + *=ees* → *meegwees* 'one cat'
      hau + *=ees* → *haaʤees* 'one tree'

In yet other varieties of Meto, insertion of /b/ occurs after final /o/ and /u/ in the same environment (Edwards 2020:130f, 250f).

These processes of consonant are synchronically productive and occur to resolve vowel hiatus across a foot boundary. Which consonant is inserted is predictable and determined by the preceding vowel. For example, in Amfo'an /ʤ/ is inserted after /i/, /l/ after /e/, and /gw/ after /o/ and /u/, while in Timaus /r/ is inserted after /i/, /l/ after /e/, /gw/ after /o/, and /ʤ/ after /u/.

While consonant insertion is a common process of hiatus resolution cross-linguistically (e.g. Casali 2011), the particular consonants inserted in these, and other varieties of Meto are typologically unusual, involving consonants which are previously unattested as a means of hiatus resolution.[1] Indeed, some of the consonants inserted in Meto (labial and dorsal consonants) have been argued to be impossible epenthetic segments because of their "markedness" (de Lacy 2006). The consonants inserted in Meto are also difficult to account for in terms of phonetic naturalness or "minimality", which are also often appealed to in order account for the kinds of consonants commonly inserted in hiatus contexts (Morely 2012).

In addition to consonant insertion patterns such as those in (1) and (2), typologically common processes of consonant insertion in hiatus contexts are attested in Meto. For example, in the Amanuban variety, insertion of /j/ and /w/ occurs when vowel final words are followed by a vowel-initial enclitic. Examples are given in (3).

(3) *ai* + *=ees* → *aijees* 'one fire' (Edwards 2020:248)
      oe + *=ees* → *oejees* 'one (body of) water'
      ao + *=ees* → *aowees* 'one (container of) slaked lime'
      hau + *=ees* → *hauwees* 'one tree/piece of wood'

In this paper, we conduct a survey of consonant insertion processes in seven varieties of Meto. Comparing data from different varieties, we consider the possible diachronic developments of patterns such as (1) and (2), finding that they can be analysed as a result of patterns like (3) undergoing regular sound changes such as glide fortition (e.g. *j →/ ʤ/, *w → /gw, b/). Thus while patterns such as (1) and (2) are typologically uncommon, they are not unexpected if considered from a diachronic and areal

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[1] Cross-linguistically, the most common consonants inserted to resolve hiatus are glides (especially homorganic glides), glottals /ʔ/ or /h/, and, more rarely, rhotics or coronals (Casali 2011). As far as we are aware, productive insertion of /ʤ/, /b/ or /gw/ to resolve hiatus is otherwise unattested. Epenthesis of /g/ is reported to occur in Halh (Khalkha) Mongolian, but is highly disputed (e.g. Staroverov 2020).

perspective. Such consonant insertion phenomena in Meto highlight the importance of diachronic and areal perspectives when examining typologically uncommon phonological phenomena (Blevins 2008).

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