Palatalization and “strong i” across Inuit dialects

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1. INTRODUCTION

Proto-Eskimo had four vowels, */i, æ, a, u/ (Fortescue et al. 1994). They survive as distinct vowels in the Yupik branch of Eskimo but, apart from some subdialects of Alaskan Inupiaq, no surface [æ] remains in the Inuit branch. In most Inuit dialects, this vowel merged with the reflexes of */i/. However, some Inuit dialects show palatalization after surface [i] corresponding to original */i/, but not after surface [i] corresponding to */æ/ (Dorais 2003:33). In these dialects it is traditional to distinguish between “strong i”, which descends from */i/ and causes palatalization, and “weak i”, which descends from */æ/ and does not.

In the other Inuit dialects the original distinction between */i/ and */æ/ has been lost. It is interesting that none of these dialects show palatalization. We will show that there is evidence that some of these dialects once had palatalization following */i/; the merger of non-palatalizing */æ/ with */i/ resulted in the loss of palatalization in these dialects. It might be expected that there would be a few dialects in which palatalization was generalized to be triggered by every surface [i], but there are no such dialects. Rather, the presence of palatalization must co-occur with an underlying contrast between /i/ and a fourth vowel. Why is this so? The lack of palatalization in any of the three-vowel dialects is a striking fact that needs to be explained.

We propose that the lack of palatalization in three-vowel dialects follows from certain assumptions about contrast and phonological activity. In brief, we argue that the contrastive status of a vowel /i/ in a four-vowel system is fundamentally different from its status in a three-vowel system.

In this article we will begin by presenting the reconstructed vowel inventory of Proto-Eskimo, highlighting empirical support for this reconstruction. Next we will...
examine the extent of synchronic and diachronic palatalization across Inuit dialects, showing that palatalization only occurs in dialects that distinguish between “strong i” and “weak i”. Finally, we will introduce our theoretical framework and propose an analysis to explain the typological gap — the absence of a dialect where all surface [i] trigger palatalization.

2. Data

In this section we present the reconstructed Proto-Eskimo vowel inventory and examine the extent of palatalization in Inuit.

2.1 Reconstructed vowel inventory of Proto-Eskimo

According to Fortescue et al. (1994:xi), Proto-Eskimo (PE) had four vowel phonemes:

\[ \begin{array}{c}
1 \quad i \\
2 \quad u \\
3 \quad \partial \\
4 \quad a
\end{array} \]

There is a great deal of support for this reconstruction from divergent sources. First, all four vowels still exist in the Diomede subdialect of Bering Strait Inupiaq and in Yupik, the sister language to Inuit.

Second, while modern Canadian and Greenlandic dialects lack surface schwa, historical documents such as Christopher Hall’s 1576 wordlist (reproduced in Dorais 2010) indicate that schwa was present in the speech of Inuit in the 16th century in the area of modern-day Iqaluit. Similarly, Dorais (2010:110–112) notes that the orthography in wordlists collected by “explorers, traders, and missionaries” between 1694 and 1770 “might indicate the presence of \[ \partial \]” in 18th-century Labrador.

Third, comparative reconstruction across Inuit dialects and between Inuit and Yupik points to the existence of //\ as a separate phoneme in PE. Dorais characterizes the method of reconstruction by specialists as follows (p. 102):

Their premise was that the most complex phonological . . . forms would also be the most conservative and thus closest to original Proto-Eskimo. This was based on the fact that linguistic materials collected in the Arctic during the past three or four centuries . . . show that the phonological . . . systems of the Eskimo languages have had a tendency to become simplified over the years. Linguistic complexity thus reflects the preservation of a more archaic way of speaking.

For instance, we can compare Fortescue et al.’s (1994:112–113, 133) reconstruction\(^2\)

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\(^1\)Dorais uses the grapheme e for \[ \partial \]. This is made clear elsewhere in his book (e.g., on p. 56).

\(^2\)Fortescue et al. use the following abbreviations for languages and dialect groups (with the representative dialect or subdialect in parentheses): AAY = Alutiiq Alaskan Yupik (Kenai Peninsula dialect); CAY = Central Alaskan Yupik (General Central Yupik dialect); CSY = Central Siberian Yupik; ECI = Eastern Canadian Inuit (Tarramiut); GRI = Greenlandic Inuit
of *əpɔ- ‘suffocate’ and *ini- ‘hang out to dry’.\(^3\)

(2) PE əpɔ- ‘suffocate’
     AAY K, PWS əpɔ-, KP əpəpə- ‘suffocate’
     CAY əpɔ- ‘suffocate, drown’
     NSY əpɔ- ‘suffocate, gasp for breath’
     CSY əpɔ- ‘become stale, flat-tasting’ (also: əpəpə- ‘gasp, suffocate’)
     Sir (pəpərmər- ‘pant, gasp’ […] )
     SPI ivi- ‘suffocate, drown’
     NAI ipi-4 ‘suffocate, drown’ (also: ipit- ‘suffocate’)
     WCI ipi-
     ECI ipi- ‘die of suffocation’ (also: ipit- ‘suffocate’)
     GRI ipi- ‘suffocate, drown’

(3) PE ini- ‘hang out to dry’
     AAY ini- ‘hang out to dry’
     CAY ini- ‘hang out to dry, hang in the air (mirage)’
     NSY —
     CSY ini- ‘hang out to dry’
     Sir —
     SPI ini- ‘hang out to dry (fish or meat)’
     NAI ipi- ‘hang out to dry’
     WCI [innitaq ‘drying rack’]\(^5\)
     ECI ini- ‘put out to dry’
     GRI ini- ‘hang up, lay out to dry’

While Yupik dialects exhibit a distinction between [ə] and [i] in these two lexemes, both contain [i] in Inuit, which is consistent with the vowels having undergone a merger in Inuit.\(^6\)

(Central West Greenlandic); K = Koniag; KP = Kenai Peninsula; NAI = North Alaskan Inuit (Barrow); NSY = Naukan(ski) Yupik; PE = Proto-Eskimo; PWS = Prince William Sound; Sir = Sirenik(ski); SPI = Seward Peninsula Inuit (King Island dialect); WCI = Western Canadian Inuit (Copper).

\(^3\)While Fortescue et al. use R and X for uvular fricatives and n\(\mathbf{y}\) for the palatal(ized) nasal, we use the standard IPA [ɾ], [ʃ], and [ɲ]. We also omit the Aleut cognates the authors sometimes include in entries, since E\(\text{skimo-Aleut}\) (the mother language to Proto-Eskimo and Aleut) has not been reconstructed and their status as cognates is often much more speculative. Square brackets in the original were changed to parentheses to differentiate them from our use of square brackets.

\(^4\)Fortescue et al. use i for “weak-i” in North Alaskan Inupiaq forms. However, they note (citing Kaplan 1981:xi) that it is “phonetically identical to i”.

\(^5\)While WCI lacks a cognate for *ini-, Fortescue et al. point the reader to this related/derived form in a subentry.

\(^6\)An alternative reconstruction lacking */al/ would need to explain the presence and distribution of [ə] in Yupik as well as its presence in the historical records of eastern dialects. In particular, it is hard to conceive of a conditioning environment that could account for the distribution of [ə] as a split instead of a merger.
Finally, the modern distribution of palatalization in Inuit dialects (as will be shown below) also points to PE having four vowels. In the next section we review the extent of palatalization across Inuit dialects.

2.2 Synchronic and diachronic palatalization across Inuit dialects

While */@/ has merged completely with */i/ in some dialects, others appear to maintain a fourth underlying vowel phoneme, as seen in the dialect-internal distribution of palatalization. In the following subsections we examine the relationship between palatalization and this fourth vowel.

2.2.1 Dialects with productive palatalization

North Alaskan Inupiaq (both the North Slope and the Malimiutun dialects), West Greenlandic, and Thule (also known as Polar Eskimo) exhibit synchronic palatalization after strong i.

For North Alaskan Inupiaq, Kaplan (1981:8) notes that “all forms of North Alaskan Inupiaq have some degree of consonant palatalization”. In the North Slope dialect, alveolars undergo palatalization after strong i but not after weak i. Kaplan (pp. 81–82) provides the following examples in nominal and verbal morphology (with proto-forms here and throughout added from Fortescue et al. 1994):

(4) Barrow palatalization after strong i in noun stems:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stem</th>
<th>Gloss</th>
<th>‘and a N’</th>
<th>‘N OBL.PL’</th>
<th>‘like a N’</th>
<th>Proto-Eskimo</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a.</td>
<td>iyulu</td>
<td>iyulu</td>
<td>iyunik</td>
<td>iyutun</td>
<td>*etiulu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b.</td>
<td>iki</td>
<td>ikiyulu</td>
<td>ikunik</td>
<td>ikisun</td>
<td>*eti</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c.</td>
<td>savik</td>
<td>saviyulu</td>
<td>saviyunik</td>
<td>saviksun</td>
<td>*tsaviy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d.</td>
<td>qimmiq</td>
<td>qimmiyulu</td>
<td>qimmiunik</td>
<td>qimmisun</td>
<td>*qikmiw</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e.</td>
<td>ini</td>
<td>iniyu</td>
<td>iniunik</td>
<td>initun</td>
<td>*eti</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f.</td>
<td>kamik</td>
<td>kamiyulu</td>
<td>kamiyunik</td>
<td>kamiktun</td>
<td>*kamow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>g.</td>
<td>aiviq</td>
<td>aiviyu</td>
<td>aiviunik</td>
<td>aiviqtun</td>
<td>*aivow</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The suffixes in (4a) have alveolar initial consonants following a stem ending in u; the suffixes in (4b–d) show palatalization of the suffix-initial consonant following strong i; and the forms in (4e–g) show that palatalization does not occur after weak i. We observe the same dichotomy in the verb stems in (5), with strong i in (5b, e, g) causing palatalization, while the weak i in (5a, c, f) does not (Kaplan 1981:81):

(5) Barrow palatalization after strong i in verb stems:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stem</th>
<th>Gloss</th>
<th>3 SG.SUB.</th>
<th>FUTURE</th>
<th>3 SG.INTR.</th>
<th>Proto-Eskimo</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| a.   | isiq- | isiqluni | isiqniaq | isiqtuq | *itiw |-
| b.   | isiq- | isiqluni | isiqniaq | isiqsuq | *itiw |-
| c.   | ipik- | ipiyulu | ipiyniaq | ipiktuq | *ipow |-

7We employ the following abbreviations in our glosses: COP = copula; DETRAN = detransitivizer; ERG = ergative; INDIC = indicative; INTR = intransitive; N = noun; NEG = negation; OBL = oblique; PART = participial mood; PE = Proto-Eskimo; PERF = perfective; PI = Proto-Inuit; PL = plural; POSS = possessive; SG = singular; SIM = similar case; SUB = subordinative mood.
d. puqi- ‘be smart’ puqiɣunisti puqiɣ￢aq puqiɣkuq *puqiɣ-
e. makit- ‘stand up’ makilluni makinniaq makittuq *makat-
f. tikit- ‘arrive’ tikiλuni tikǐņiaq tikitiuq *tikit-

Notice that in both (4) and (5) strong i corresponds to etymological8 */i/ while weak i corresponds to */ə/.9 Kaplan (1981:31) recognizes this distinction, stating the following:

All Inupiaq dialects have a phonetic three vowel system, although our feature matrix includes, in parentheses, a fourth vowel, schwa, which is often represented as i. While i is not present phonetically, there are strong arguments for its existence underlingly because of phonological processes which it motivates... An abstract phonological analysis of Inupiaq would posit an underlying fourth vowel, and we admit to the possibility of such a solution . . . .

Moving next to the neighbouring Malimiutun dialect, Kaplan (1981:96–97) notes that the Kobuk subdialect exhibits “an even greater range of palatalization phenomena”. In particular, he notes that palatalization extends to /ɬ/, resulting in [s].10 He gives the following examples of verb stems followed by the affix /ɬuk/ ‘want to’:

(6) /iya+ɬuk-/ → [iɣaɬuk-]
   cook-want-
   ‘want to cook’
(7) /tini+ɬuk-/ → [tiniɬuk-] (cf. PE *təŋ-)  
   take. flight-want-
   ‘want to take flight’
(8) /tini+m+ɬuk-/ → [tinimisuk-] (cf. PI *təŋmi-)  
   fly-want-
   ‘want to fly’
(9) /niri+m+ɬuk-/ → [niriisuk-] (cf. PE *nəŋ-)  
   eat-want-
   ‘want to eat’

Once again we see in (7) an instance of stem-final [i] patterning with other vowels in not triggering palatalization, while the instances of [i] in (8) and (9) cause /ɬ/ to

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8 It should be noted that the distribution of reconstructed */ə/ is not based solely on the distribution of palatalization; if it were, this would leave us open to the charge of circularity. The co-extensive distribution of schwa in modern Yupik languages and the Diomede subdialect of Bering Strait, along with historical documentation of eastern Canadian dialects noted above, provides independent support for these reconstructions.

9 It is notable that palatalization is unaffected by an intervening consonant, as exemplified in (4c) and (5a–d). In (5e–f) the intervening consonants between the stem vowel and the suffix initial consonant undergo assimilation. In this subdialect homorganic consonant clusters must agree in nasal/lateral manner.

10 This is a separate phoneme in Kobuk but not in Barrow where it is an allophone of /ɬ/ (Kaplan 1981:26).
palatalize to [s]. It is worth noting here that */尚书/ is unexpected in the reconstructed proto-form for ‘eat’. Kaplan notes that “the Inupiaq vowel system does not always match in a simple or obvious way that of related languages or of Proto Eskimo” and furthermore that “Inupiaq seems to have innovated a palatalizing type in many cases where Yupik shows a schwa, as is the case with Inupiaq *尚书–, which triggers palatalization, as against Yupik *尚书.” (p. 84). However, as illustrated in the examples above, in the majority of cases strong *尚书 and weak *尚书 correspond to *尚书 and *尚书, respectively.

At the other end of the geographic dialect continuum, we also observe synchronic palatalization in Greenlandic. According to Dorais (2003:139) “all three Greenlandic dialects assimilate (i.e., palatalize) t after a strong i, although in East Greenlandic, this phenomenon is not always systematic”. Setting aside the status of palatalization in East Greenlandic for the moment, consider the following examples from Dorais (2003:139) comparing Greenlandic dialects to a non-palatalizing dialect from Canadian Inuktitut, with proto-forms from Fortescue et al.:

(10) **Palatalization in Greenlandic dialects (cf. non-palatalizing Aivilik):**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>West Gr.</th>
<th>East Gr.</th>
<th>Thule</th>
<th>Aivilik</th>
<th>Gloss</th>
<th>PE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. isiŋ</td>
<td>isiŋ</td>
<td>isiŋ</td>
<td>ihiŋ</td>
<td>itiŋ</td>
<td>‘foot’</td>
<td>*itŋay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. sisamat</td>
<td>sisamat</td>
<td>hihamat</td>
<td>sitamat</td>
<td></td>
<td>‘four’</td>
<td>*tsitamat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. kalaalitsit</td>
<td>kalaalitsit</td>
<td>kalaallihut</td>
<td>kalaallitut</td>
<td>‘Greenlandic’ (loan)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. niiskurpaa</td>
<td>niiskurpaa</td>
<td>niiskurpaa</td>
<td>niiskurpaa</td>
<td>niiskurpaa</td>
<td>‘praise him’</td>
<td>*niiskuq-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e. isiŋŋjitsuq</td>
<td>isiŋŋjitsiŋ</td>
<td>isiŋŋjitsuq</td>
<td>isiŋŋjitsuq</td>
<td>isiŋŋjitsuq</td>
<td>‘who does not enter’</td>
<td>*isŋŋŋ-ŋ-niŋ-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In West Greenlandic, Greenlandic, and Thule we see palatalization after strong *尚书, which once again corresponds to PE *尚书. Note that in both (10c) and (10e), palatalization is occurring across a morpheme boundary, with the strong *尚书 in /kalaaliŋ/ ‘Greenlander’ causing palatalization on the similaris case marker /tut/ and the strong *尚书 in /ŋŋjitsuŋ/ ‘NEG’ causing palatalization on the third-person singular participial inflection /tuq/.

Rischel (1974) provides further examples of palatalization occurring across morpheme boundaries in West Greenlandic. For instance, the noun-incorporating verb /tuq/ ‘consume’ is unchanged after a noun stem ending in /u/, as shown in (11), and is unchanged after weak *尚书 in (12) and (13); but it undergoes palatalization after strong *尚书 in (14) and (15) (p. 261; glosses added, proto-forms from Fortescue et al.):

(11) /tuttu+tuq+puq/ → [tuttutu*puq]\(^\text{11}\)

reindeer-consume-INDIC.3SG

eats reindeer meat

(12) /tšiŋ(q)+tuq+puq/ → [tšiŋtu*puq]

tea-consume-INDIC.3SG

drinks tea

\(^{11}\)Rischel uses a superscript \([r]\) to represent vowel coloration (possibly uvularization or pharyngealization) caused by underlying uvular segments which are subsequently the target of regressive assimilation by a following consonant. We use IPA \([r]\) instead.
(13) /niqi+tuq+puq/ → [niqitu\^ppuq]
meat-consume-INDIC.3SG
‘eats meat’ (cf. PE *naqə)

(14) /kaffi+tuq+puq/ → [kaffisu\^ppuq]
coffee-consume-INDIC.3SG
‘drinks coffee’

(15) /missi+tuq+puq/ → [missisu\^ppuq]
dried.fish-consume-INDIC.3SG
‘eats dried fish’ (cf. PE *pimtsi)

Similarly, Rischel (p. 261) gives examples of the participial verbal inflection /-tuq/ after weak i in (16), as compared to the palatalized variant which emerges after strong i in (17) and (18) (glosses added):

(16) /sinik+tuq/ → [sinittuq]
sleep-PART.3SG
‘sleeping’ (cf. PE *tsinak-)

(17) /pikkuriik+tuq/ → [pikkurissuq]
diligent-PART.3SG
‘diligent’ (cf. PE *pokku(\(\chi\)) + *ki\(\chi\))

(18) /nu\^anniq+tuq/ → [nu\^anni\^ssuq]
amusing-PART.3SG
‘amusing’ (cf. PE *nunanni\^u-)

Rischel (p. 263) also demonstrates that the plural marker /-i/ causes palatalization of a subsequent portmanteau possessive and ergative case marker:

(19) /i\^lu+a+ta/ → [i\^lu\^ata]
house-SG-3.POSS.ERG
‘his/their house’

(20) /i\^lu+i+ta/ → [i\^lu\^isa]
house-PL-3.POSS.ERG
‘his/their houses’ (cf. PE *\(\eta\)i)

(21) /ila+a+ta/ → [ilaata]
companion-SG-3.POSS.ERG
‘his/their companion’

(22) /ila+i+ta/ → [ilaasa]\(^{12}\)
companion-PL-3.POSS.ERG
‘his/their companions’

\(^{12}\)The sequence /ai/ undergoes a synchronic process of vowel assimilation to [aa] in West Greenlandic.
Rischel (p. 261) notes that palatalization of /t/ cannot occur word-finally, stating that “/t/ (or /ts/) goes to /s/ if it is preceded by /i/, with or without one intervening (non-coronal) consonant, and if it is at the same time followed by a vowel”. However, the lack of word-final palatalization appears to be due to a phonotactic constraint banning word-final fricatives, across all Canadian and Greenlandic Inuit. Nevertheless, he gives the following example of a noun ending in a strong /i/ followed by a /t/ which undergoes palatalization once the vowel-initial plural suffix is added:

(23) /kisititsit-it/ → [kisititsisit]

‘figures (digits)’

In sum, we observe synchronic palatalization of /t/ after strong /i/ in West Greenlandic. Rischel (p. 274) notes, however, that northern subdialects of West Greenlandic have “much less assimilation of suffix initial /t/”, and thus these subdialects (Northern and Upernavik) will be presumed to have only fossilized palatalization. Thule (also known as Polar Eskimo) also exhibits synchronic palatalization; however the situation is complicated by the fact that [s] is debuccalized to [h] intervocalically (although sometimes it is realized as [ç], as noted in Fortescue 1991:9).

Rischel notes that some morphemes exhibit variation in whether they cause palatalization. For instance, the suffix /-vik/ ‘place for –’ triggers palatalization of /taaq/ ‘new’ in [uqaluf-fis-saq] ‘new church’ but not of /tuqaq/ ‘old’ in [uqaluf-fit-tuqaq] ‘old church’. He notes similar examples with /savi/ ‘knife’, /pusi-/- ‘lay [upside down]’, /kini/- ‘soak’, and /kii/- ‘bite’. Crucially, though, all such cases correspond to etymological */i/ (i.e., *-ðvi; *ţavi; *puţi; *k@nit), except for *k@G@ ‘bite’ which also causes palatalization in Inupiaq and thus likely shifted from */@/ to */i/ in Proto-Inuit, perhaps because the loss of intervocalic */y/ in this form would have left a long schwa which was illicit, as it is synchronically in Yupik (Jacobson 1995:5–6). Importantly, palatalization has not been extended to occur freely after surface [i].

Rischel notes also that some subdialects of West Greenlandic affricate /t/ before [i], regardless of its (synchronic) strong or weak status, as shown in (i). However, there is reason to believe that this is a late phonetic rule. While the palatalization/assimilation phenomenon that is the topic of this article can occur across an intervening consonant, affrication is strictly local.

(i) /tuqut-ti-vuq/ → [tuquttsivuq]

kill-DET-TRANS-INDIC.3SG

(ii) /kunik-ti-vuq/ → [kunissivuq] (cf. PI *kunik-) smell-DET-TRANS-INDIC.3SG

It is likely that there is also synchronic palatalization of /t/ > [h] intervocalically across morpheme boundaries. However, along with WG, Thule has neutralized the exponents of both *ts and *ð (while other dialects of Inuit either maintain a synchronic distinction or have collapsed *ð with *j). Since all Inuit dialects exhibit allomorphy between [t]-initial suffixes (which occur after consonants) and those beginning with the dialect-specific modern exponent of *ð (which occur intervocally), as illustrated below, it is difficult to distinguish between this pan-Inuit gradation-based allomorphy (which extends beyond coronals) and palatalization.
However, [s] can still appear after [t] and it is in this environment that we can see productive alternations across morpheme boundaries, as illustrated in the examples collected in (24) from Fortescue (1991):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stem</th>
<th>Gloss</th>
<th>PART.3SG</th>
<th>PE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. qitut-</td>
<td>‘is soft, flexible’</td>
<td>qitut-tuq</td>
<td>*qatut-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. haat-</td>
<td>‘is thin, flat’</td>
<td>haat-tuq</td>
<td>*tsaat-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. qanit-</td>
<td>‘is near’</td>
<td>qanit-tuq</td>
<td>*qanot-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. tinit-</td>
<td>‘tide is getting low’</td>
<td>tinit-tuq</td>
<td>*tanat-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e. mamit-</td>
<td>‘heals, forms a scar’</td>
<td>mamit-tuq</td>
<td>*mamot-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f. amit-</td>
<td>‘is narrow, thin’</td>
<td>amit-suq</td>
<td>*amit-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>g. nait-</td>
<td>‘is short’</td>
<td>nait-suq</td>
<td>*nanit-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>h. takpiit-</td>
<td>‘(is) blind’</td>
<td>takpiit-suq</td>
<td>*takviit-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>i. amit-</td>
<td>‘is narrow, thin’</td>
<td>amit-suq</td>
<td>*amit-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The vowels /u/ and /a/ do not trigger palatalization of the initial /t/ of the participial inflection marker /-tuq/ in (24a–b), and neither does weak i in (24c–e). Conversely, strong i in (24f–i) does cause palatalization. Similarly, the negation marker /ŋŋit/ consistently triggers palatalization of participial inflection markers, such as /-tuŋŋa/ (Fortescue 1991:174, 178):

(25) niŋŋiŋŋit-suŋŋa (cf. *-ŋŋit- ‘NEGATION’)

eat-NEG-PART.1SG
‘I am not eating.’

(26) uniur-hamaŋŋit-suŋŋa
miss-PERF-NEG-PART.1SG
‘I haven’t missed.’

To summarize, as in West Greenlandic, Thule appears to exhibit synchronic palatalization after strong i.16

In the next subsection we will examine dialects in which palatalization is fossilized, including East Greenlandic.

2.2.2 Dialects with fossilized palatalization

As illustrated in (10), East Greenlandic possesses examples of palatalization; however, Dorais (2003:139) characterizes it as being “not always systematic”. Dorais seems to be suggesting that while palatalization is synchronically productive in West

---

16 Comparing the Thule verb forms in Fortescue (1991) and the corresponding proto-forms in Fortescue et al. (1994), we observe several instances where an original *i no longer causes palatalization. However, these exceptions all appear to be in one direction; no segments corresponding to */a/ have innovated palatalization.
Greenlandic and Thule, it has become fossilized in East Greenlandic. This is supported by Tersis (2008:25) who states:

Il semblerait que ces variations soient actuellement figées en tunumiisut [= East Greenlandic]. L’explication, d’ordre diachronique, résulterait de la palatalisation et de l’assibilation de la consonne /t/ dans des contextes spécifiques de consonnes apicales et vélaires en relation avec la présence d’un *i fort précessif distinct d’un *i faible dans la phonologie du proto-eskimo.

Still, as illustrated earlier and stated by Tersis, these fossilized instances of palatalization arose diachronically after strong $i$, supporting the hypothesis that palatalization was productive after strong $i$ at an earlier stage.

We see a similar situation in North Baffin and Southeast Baffin, with Dorais (2003:96) stating that in these dialects “palatalization does not seem to be productive any more”. Once again, though, the fossilized instances of palatalization occur after etymological */i/, as illustrated below (Dorais 2003:97):

(27) *Palatalization in North and Southeast Baffin dialects:*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>North Baffin</th>
<th>Southeast Baffin</th>
<th>Southwest Baffin</th>
<th>Gloss</th>
<th>Proto-Eskimo</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. isiqpuq</td>
<td>isiqpuq</td>
<td>isiqpuq</td>
<td>itiqpuq</td>
<td>*ite-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. akisiq</td>
<td>akisiq</td>
<td>akisiq</td>
<td>akiti</td>
<td>*akin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. isiɣak</td>
<td>isiɣak</td>
<td>isiɣak</td>
<td>itiɣak</td>
<td>*itɣaɣ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. ivisaaɣuq</td>
<td>ivisaaɣuq</td>
<td>ivisaaɣuq</td>
<td>ivitaɣuq</td>
<td>*ivitaɣuq</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e. -ilisaq</td>
<td>-ilisaq</td>
<td>-ilisaq/-ilitaq</td>
<td>-ilitaq</td>
<td>*-ŋilitaŋ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f. tisijuq</td>
<td>tisijuq</td>
<td>sisjuq/sitijuq</td>
<td>sitijuq</td>
<td>*tsita(ɣ)-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>g. tisamat</td>
<td>tisamat</td>
<td>sitamat</td>
<td>sitamat</td>
<td>*tsitam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>h. tikittuŋa</td>
<td>tikittuŋa</td>
<td>tikittuŋa</td>
<td>tikittuŋa</td>
<td>*takit-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>i. qaiŋqittuŋ</td>
<td>qaiŋqittuŋ</td>
<td>qaiŋqittuŋ</td>
<td>qaiŋqittuŋ</td>
<td>*qaba-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

17 This form is reconstructed to Proto-Inuit, not Proto-Eskimo.

18 Examples (f–g) illustrate metathesis of /sit/ sequences containing strong $i$ in North Baffin and in Cumberland Peninsula Southeast Baffin.

Dorais notes that palatalization of /tt/ sequences in North Baffin, such as those in (27h–i), appears to be confined to older speakers. Furthermore, he notes that palatalization fails to apply in a number of contexts (as compared to Inupiaq or Greenlandic dialects):

(28) *North Baffin:*

tupi-ŋi-titut

tent-PL-3PL.POSS.SIM

‘like their tents’

(29) *Inupiaq (Malimiutun):*

tupi-ŋi-situn

However, once again, the fossilized instances of palatalization occur after strong $i$ (i.e., the positions where dialects with synchronically productive palatalization have strong $i$).
Finally, Dorais (2003:62) states that in the Western Canadian dialect of Natsilingmiutut, “a few speakers pronounce s or ʃ, instead of t, in a few morphemes containing a strong i (such as -ŋŋitʃiq, ‘does not’)” (italics added). These forms may reflect an earlier stage with some palatalization after strong i.

2.2.3 Dialects without palatalization

The remaining dialects of Inuit (including Bering Strait, Qawiaraq, Siglitun, Inuinnnaqtun, Kivalliq, Aivilik, Southwest Baffin, Nunavik, and Nunatsiavut) lack palatalization. These fall into two categories: those with four vowels and those with three.

According to Kaplan (1990:145) the Diomede subdialect of Bering Strait “has the full four-vowel system, with schwa in words like əməq ‘water’ and ənə ‘house, place’, where other Inuit have imiq and ini”. Similarly, he states that “many subdialects of Seward Peninsula Inupiaq still maintain a phonetic schwa in certain contexts”.

The other non-palatalizing dialects have only three vowels (see Table 1 for a detailed list).

2.2.4 Summary of dialects and a typological gap

Table 1 summarizes the status of palatalization across Inuit as well as the observed vowel inventory (either overt or underlying). We adopt Dorais’s (2010) division of dialect groups, subgroups, dialects, and subdialects.19

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19 Dorais’s dialect divisions conform with those in Kaplan (1981), Petersen (1990), and Fortescue et al. (1994), inter alia.
Table 1: Summary of palatalization across Inuit dialects

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Subgroup</th>
<th>Dialect</th>
<th>Subdialect</th>
<th>Vowels</th>
<th>Palatalization</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alaskan Inupiaq</td>
<td>Seward</td>
<td>Bering Strait</td>
<td>Diomede</td>
<td>4\textsuperscript{a}</td>
<td>NO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Wales</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>King Island</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Qawiaraq</td>
<td>Teller</td>
<td>4\textsuperscript{b}</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Fish River</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern Alaskan Inupiaq</td>
<td>Malimutun</td>
<td>Kobuk</td>
<td>Common NS</td>
<td></td>
<td>YES; PRODUCTIVE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Kotzebue</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>North Slope</td>
<td>Common NS</td>
<td>Point Barrow</td>
<td>4\textsuperscript{c}</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Anaktuvuk</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Uummarmiut</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Western Canadian Inuktun</td>
<td>Siglitun</td>
<td>Holman</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>NO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Inuinnagtun</td>
<td>Kugluktuk</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Bathurst</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Cambridge Bay</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Natsilingmiutut</td>
<td>Natsilik</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>FOSSILIZED</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Arviligjuag</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Utkuhiksalik</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textsuperscript{a}Schwa maintained at the surface in Diomede subdialect.
\textsuperscript{b}According to Dorais (2003), these subdialects exhibit “sporadic” schwa.
\textsuperscript{c}These dialects possess strong \textit{i} and weak \textit{i}, where the latter corresponds to etymological schwa (and surface schwa in Diomede and the closely related Yupik language).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Subgroup</th>
<th>Dialect</th>
<th>Subdialect</th>
<th>Vowels</th>
<th>Palatalization</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Eastern Canadian Inuktitut</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kivalliq</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Qairnirmiut</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>NO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Kivalliq</td>
<td>Hauniqturmiut</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Paallirmiut</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Aivilik</td>
<td>Ahiarmiut</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Southampton</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Rankin Inlet</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baffin</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Iglulingmiut</td>
<td>3/4</td>
<td>PROBABLY FOSSILIZED</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Tununirmiut</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Baffin</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Southeast</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>FOSSILIZED</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Southwest</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>NO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quebec– Labrador</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Itivimiut</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>NO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Tarramiut</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>N. Labrador</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Rigolet</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greenlandic</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Central</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>YES; PRODUCTIVE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Greenland</td>
<td>W. Greenland</td>
<td>Southern</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Northern</td>
<td>3/4</td>
<td>PROBABLY FOSSILIZED</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Greenland</td>
<td>E. Greenland</td>
<td>Upernavik</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Ammassalik</td>
<td>3/4</td>
<td>PROBABLY FOSSILIZED</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Sermilik</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polar</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Thule</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>YES; PRODUCTIVE</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^d\)The number of vowels in North Baffin, East Greenlandic, and the Northern and Upernavik dialects of West Greenlandic depends on whether palatalization is synchronic or fossilized in lexical items. If they are fossilizations (i.e., /s/ in their underlying forms) there would be little or no evidence for speakers to posit a distinct underlying fourth vowel. Conversely, if palatalization is synchronic then speakers would need to posit a fourth vowel (so as not to over generate).

We see in this table that, with respect to the relationship between palatalization and the vowel inventory, there are three types of Inuit dialects/subdialects, with a fourth typological possibility remaining unattested:
Typology of Inuit vowel inventories and palatalization:

a. Four vowels, without palatalization (e.g., Diomede)
b. Four vowels, with palatalization (e.g., North Slope)
c. Three vowels, without palatalization (e.g., Aivilik)
d. Three vowels, with palatalization (not attested)

The dialects of type (30b) maintain a distinction between palatalizing /i/ and a non-palatalizing fourth vowel, even though the phonetic motivation for distinguishing between types of /i/ is gone. This perseveration of a distinction in the absence of its phonetic motivation, as schematized in (31a), is a common historical pattern.\(^\text{20}\)

The dialects of type (30c) show no palatalization. It may be that some of these dialects never had palatalization at all, but it is unlikely that none of them did. Given the presence of palatalization in every dialect group (if only as fossilizations), it is reasonable to assume that some of the dialects of type (30c) descend from a dialect that had palatalization after */i/*. Evidently, once */i/* and */a/* were no longer distinct, speakers of these dialects opted for a “concrete” solution to the problem of distinguishing which vowels caused palatalization and which did not by simply doing away with palatalization altogether, thus simplifying the phonology, as in (31b). This, too, is a common historical development when an original contrast is lost.

Why, however, do we find no examples of the opposite merger (30d)? Given a dialect where /i/ causes palatalization, we might expect it to continue doing so and to extend this process to “new” instances of [i] that arise from */i/*. Assuming that palatalization after [i] has phonetic motivation, it is all the more striking that not a single dialect opted for what might appear to be the optimal solution to the merger of the vowels: maintain palatalization (after /i/), and simplify the grammar by treating all instances of surface [i] the same. By the same token, why has no three-vowel dialect innovated palatalization?

Diachronic developments from original dialect with palatalization:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Original dialect</th>
<th>*/i/ &gt; is</th>
<th>*/a/ &gt; at</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Maintain four vowels:</td>
<td>/i/ &gt; is</td>
<td>/N/ &gt; it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lose palatalization:</td>
<td>/i/ &gt; is  &gt; it</td>
<td>/N/ &gt; /i/ &gt; it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Extend palatalization:</td>
<td>/i/ &gt; is</td>
<td>/N/ &gt; /a/ &gt; it</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

No dialect shows evidence of having merged /i/ and the fourth vowel while maintaining synchronically productive palatalization (as in 31c). Even diachronically, fossilized instances of palatalization occur after etymological */i/*, demonstrating that the four-vowel inventory was maintained (at least underlyingly) at the time that palatalization was active. No three-vowel dialect has extended palatalization to all surface occurrences of [i] upon the loss of the underlying fourth vowel.

We argue in the next section that this typological gap can be explained via an analysis that draws a connection between phonological activity and contrast.

\(^{20}\)Here we use /N/ to represent the underlying fourth vowel (i.e., weak /i/).
3. **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND ANALYSIS**

In this section we outline our theoretical framework and present our analysis.

3.1 **Contrast and activity in phonology**

A recurring theme throughout the history of phonological theory is that contrastive properties of phonemes play a special role. This view was particularly prominent among the Prague School linguists such as Jakobson and Trubetzkoy (see Dresher 2009 for discussion), and can be found in the work of contemporary phonologists such as Calabrese (1995, 2005), Clements (2001), and Nevins (2010). It is a main contention of the general approach we follow here, that of Modified Contrastive Specification (Avery and Rice 1989, Dresher et al. 1994, Dresher 2009). This theory adopts what D.C. Hall (2007:20) has called the Contrastivist Hypothesis, which he states as in (32).

\[
\text{(32) Contrastivist Hypothesis:}
\]
\[
\text{The phonological component of a language L operates only on those features which are necessary to distinguish the phonemes of L from one another.}
\]

Put another way, the Contrastivist Hypothesis holds that only contrastive features are active in the phonology. By “active” we mean that a feature can spread, or provoke harmony, or otherwise influence other segments in the phonology. Various phonologists have advocated a “minimalist” approach to phonology, attributing to segments only those properties that are required to account for phonological patterning.\(^{21}\) Clements (2001:71–72) proposes, for example, that “phonological representations should be freed of superfluous representational elements, leaving only those that are essential to an understanding of lexical, phonological, and phonetic generalizations”.

3.2 **Active features in Inuit dialects**

Throughout this article we have considered one example of phonological activity — namely, palatalization of consonants by /i/. Palatalizing /i/ must have an active feature that causes palatalization; we will call this feature [coronal].\(^{22}\) It follows from the Contrastivist Hypothesis that if a feature is active, then it must be contrastive. However, /i/ in three-vowel dialects does not cause palatalization; hence, there is no evidence that [coronal] is active in three-vowel dialects. The typological gap can be accounted for if we can explain why [coronal] is not active in three-vowel dialects.

---


\(^{22}\) The feature [coronal] can be considered equivalent to [front] for our purposes. How palatalization works is the subject of some debate; see Kenstowicz (1994), T.A. Hall (2007), and Kochetov (2011) for overviews and references. All that is important here is that /i/ bears some contrastive feature that triggers palatalization.
Apart from palatalization, what other examples of phonological activity are manifested by Inuit dialects? The vowel /i/ does not appear to initiate or participate in other processes, but /a/ and /u/ do. We will argue that there is synchronic evidence that /a/ has an active feature [low] and that /u/ has an active feature [labial].

First, in West and East Greenlandic the sequences /ai/ and /au/ become [aa], except word-finally (Rischel 1974:74):

\[(33) \text{/sava+innaq/} \rightarrow \text{[savaannaq]} \]
\[\text{sheep-merely}\]
\[(34) \text{/nuna+u+vuq/} \rightarrow \text{[nunaauvq]} \]
\[\text{land-COP-INDIC.3SG}\]

While not specifically pointing to the feature [low], this assimilation can be construed as a feature spreading from /a/ to the following vowel. Moreover, Robbe and Dorais (1986:xx, 105) note that in East Greenlandic uvular segments can cause a preceding /i/ to lower to [a]:

\[(35) \text{sana}ð \text{aq} \text{‘a side’ (cf. saniliq ‘neighbour”; saniani ‘beside’)}\]

We contend that a feature such as [low] on uvulars spreading to a preceding /i/ is a possible explanation of this lowering.\(^{23}\)

Evidence for the feature [labial] (equivalent for our purposes to [round]) can also be found in East Greenlandic and subdialects of West Greenlandic. Dorais (2003:142) describes a process of vowel harmony in which /u/ becomes [i] in specific phonological environments. Crucially, though, this process is blocked if /u/ “belongs to a syllable initiated by a bilabial consonant”, arguably due to the presence of the feature [labial] on the consonant. Furthermore, he notes that “when immediately followed by another vowel, /u/, /ua/ and /iu/ change to [iv] and [iiv]” (p. 143; slanted and square brackets added). Dorais gives the examples of iivit ‘people’ and niiva ‘his/her leg’, which appear to be derived as follows:

\[(36) \text{UR} \text{/inuk+it/} \text{ person-PL}\]
\[\text{/inuit/} \text{ (deletion of final consonant of stem}\(^{24}\))\]
\[\text{/iuit/} \text{ (gradation/elision of intervocalic [n], p. 141)}\]
\[\text{SR} \text{[iivit]} \text{ (/iui/} \rightarrow \text{[iivi]})\]

\[(37) \text{UR} \text{/niuq+a/} \text{ leg-3SG.POSS}\]
\[\text{/niua/} \text{ (deletion of final consonant of stem)}\]
\[\text{SR} \text{[niiva]} \text{ (/iua/} \rightarrow \text{[iiva])}\]

Once again, the shift between vowel /u/ and consonant [v] suggests a shared feature. We contend that [labial] is a natural choice for this feature.\(^{25}\)

---

\(^{23}\)Nevins (2010:104), following Trigo (1991), observes that uvulars may be distinguished from velars cross-linguistically by the features [low], [high], or [ATR]. In a three- or four-vowel system it is not crucial which of these is chosen, as all perform a roughly similar contrastive function.

\(^{24}\)Across Inuit, a number of suffixes cause a preceding consonant to delete. For instance, in both Western and Eastern Canadian Inuktutit we have iqluk ‘fish (SG)’ and iqlu-it ‘fish (PL)’; umiaq ‘boat’ and umia-t ‘boats’ (Dorais 2003).

\(^{25}\)Further evidence for specifying /a/ as [labial] comes from the sister language of Yupik. Central Siberian Yupik possesses a series of labialized velars /k^w, y^w, x^w, η^w/, in addition to
3.3 Contrastive features in Inuit dialects

Based on our brief survey of phonological activity in Inuit vowels, we have concluded that [low] is active in /a/, [labial] is active in /u/, and [coronal] is active in palatalizing /i/. According to the Contrastivist Hypothesis, these features must also be contrastive. In this section we will consider how to draw the connection between activity and contrast.

Consider again the vowel system of Proto-Eskimo, repeated from (1).

(38) \[ i \quad u \]
\[ \bar{e} \quad a \]

Let us begin by considering how these vowels might be specified using conventional binary features. To the features we have already identified as active we can add [high], a common feature in analyses of simple vowel systems. The full specifications of the vowels in (38) are as in (39).

(39) **Full feature specifications of Proto-Eskimo vowels**:

\[
\begin{array}{cccc}
 & i & \bar{e} & a & u \\
[low] & - & - & + & - \\
[high] & + & - & - & + \\
[coronal] & + & - & - & - \\
[labial] & - & - & - & + \\
\end{array}
\]

Inspection of these specifications reveals that not all of them are required in order to distinguish these vowels from each other. That is, some specifications are predictable. For example, if we know that /a/ is [+low], then we can predict that it is [−high]; given that /u/ is [+labial], we can deduce its other features; and so on. Put differently, not all features are contrastive; some are redundant.

3.3.1 Contrastive features by the Pairwise Approach

How do we determine which features are contrastive? A common procedure is to identify as contrastive only those features that uniquely distinguish a pair of phonemes. For example, Nevins (2010:98) defines (positional) contrastiveness as in (40); we will call this the Pairwise Approach to contrast:

(40) **Positional Contrastiveness**:

A segment S in position P is contrastive for the feature F iff there exists a segment S′ in the inventory that is featurally identical to S for all values except F, and S′ can occur in position P as well.

Applying this Pairwise Approach to the specifications in (39) does not yield satisfactory results; as shown in (41), the feature [low] uniquely distinguishes /a/ from /\bar{e}/, but no other specifications in (39) are identified as contrastive.

the plain velars. Krauss (1975:48) writes that “[t]he labialized velars arise etymologically or morphophonemically in probably every case (except certain instances of /x/ and in loans) from the vowel /u/ between a velar and another vowel, to which the /u/ then becomes assimilated, after leaving the velar labialized”. Labialization can be taken as evidence that /u/ bears a phonologically active [labial] feature.
Contrastive feature specifications by the Pairwise Approach:

\[
i \quad a \quad u
\]

[low] \quad - \quad +
[high]
[coronal]
[labial]

The Pairwise Approach fares even worse when applied to the three-vowel inventory /i, a, u/: here, no features are identified as contrastive, because every phoneme is distinguished from every other one by more than a single feature. To make a connection with phonological activity in these inventories, we need a different approach to contrast.\(^{26}\)

3.3.2 Contrastive features by the Successive Division Algorithm

We will assume here that contrastive specifications are assigned by a procedure called the Successive Division Algorithm (SDA) (Dresher 1998, 2003, 2009). This algorithm derives from work of Roman Jakobson and his collaborators (Jakobson et al. 1952, Cherry et al. 1953, Jakobson and Halle 1956, Halle 1959). An informal statement of this algorithm is given in (42).

(42) Successive Division Algorithm:

a. Begin with feature specifications: assume all sounds are allophones of a single undifferentiated phoneme.

b. If the set is found to consist of more than one contrasting member, select a feature and divide the set into as many subsets as the feature allows for.

c. Repeat step (b) in each subset: keep dividing up the inventory into sets, applying successive features in turn, until every set has only one member.

In this approach, features are ordered into a contrastive hierarchy. The ordering of the features and the SDA determine what the contrastive feature specifications are for an inventory. We assume that the ordering of features may vary cross-linguistically, though some orderings may be more common than others. Since the ordering is variable, we must seek evidence for the ordering, in the first place, from phonological activity.

3.3.3 Contrastive features in Proto-Eskimo and modern four-vowel dialects

We have seen that in four-vowel dialects the features [low], [labial], and [coronal] are active. This fact suggests that these features should be at the top of the contrastive hierarchy in these dialects. Since these three features are sufficient to fully distinguish the four vowel phonemes, no other features, such as [high], can be contrastive.

Based on the phonological activity observed in all the dialects (including three-vowel dialects), we propose the contrastive feature hierarchy in (43) for the Proto-Eskimo vowel system. For each feature we distinguish between the marked value (in small caps) and the unmarked, or default, value (in parentheses).

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\(^{26}\)See Dresher (2009) for a detailed discussion of the problems with the Pairwise Approach.
Following Jakobson and Halle (1956), the first division of a vowel system usually distinguishes vowels of high sonority, or lower vowels, from higher vowels of lower sonority. Consequently, we choose the feature [low], which divides the vowel /a/ from the other vowels. Now that /a/ is uniquely specified, it receives no further contrastive features, as shown in (43).

The non-low vowels can be divided up in a number of ways. A common pattern is that the next division is based on a place feature. Of the two active place features, we propose that [labial] is the next feature in the order, for reasons that will become clear later. It separates the vowel /u/ from the other two vowels. Now /u/ is in contrast with every other vowel, and receives no further contrastive features.

This leaves the vowel phonemes /i/ and /a/ to be distinguished by the feature [coronal]. Now all the vowels have been distinguished, as shown in (44), with only the contrastive specifications. In this system, /a/ is the least marked vowel — in fact, totally unmarked for vowel features — while the other vowels each have one contrastive feature.

Evidence for this comes from Yupik, which retains the four-vowel system. However, schwa does not have the same status as the other vowels. According to Kaplan (1990:147), it “cannot occur long or in a cluster with another vowel”, instead undergoing dissimilation or assimilation when adjacent to full vowels. Susceptibility to assimilation is characteristic of unmarked elements: they tend to be targets of phonological processes and they are not triggers (Rice 2007). For instance, Jacobson (1995:37, 45) states that sequences of /ɔŋi/ become [ai] when the velar nasal

---

27 Inverting the order of [low] and [labial] (i.e., if our hierarchy were to be ordered [labial] > [low] . . . instead of [low] > [labial] . . . ) would be compatible with the analysis presented here. Ultimately, the ordering is the product of phonological evidence available to speakers during language acquisition and potentially of cross-linguistic universals.
is dropped between two single vowels, while other vowel-schwa clusters created by velar/uvular dropping undergo assimilation:

(45) a. /nɔqɔ+ŋit-/ → [nɔqaitɔ-]
   fish-lack-
   ‘lack fish’

   b. /atkuŋ+ɔt/ → /atkuɔt/ → [atkuut]
   parka-PL
   ‘parkas’

   c. /tanŋuŋɑ+ɔt/ → /tanŋuŋɑɔt/ → [tanŋuŋaat]
   boy-PL
   ‘boys’

Similarly, in some Inuit dialects weak i undergoes a variety of assimilation and deletion processes that do not affect strong i or the other vowels /u/ and /a/, further suggesting that it lacks contrastive features. For example, weak i changes to [a] before another vowel, as in (46a), but strong i does not, as illustrated in (46b).

(46) Barrow Inupiaq weak and strong i before a vowel:

   a. /ajuti+u+tuq/ → [ajutauuq] (cf. PE *aŋun\(^{28}\))
      man-COP-PART.3SG
      ‘It is a man.’

   b. /iki+u+tuq/ → [ikiuq] (cf. PE *oki)
      wound-COP-PART.3SG
      ‘It is a wound.’

(Kaplan 1981:119)

Following Underhill (1976) and Kaplan (1981), we take the view that dialects that distinguish between strong and weak i retain four underlying vowels, as in the proto-language, with the same contrastive features as in (43) and (44).\(^{29}\) This analysis accounts for the phonological behaviour of this vowel system, including productive phonological processes like those in Inupiaq. Thus, these contrastive values account for the fact that /i/ can trigger palatalization, as it has a relevant contrastive feature. The fourth vowel is the least marked, literally, and therefore cannot trigger palatalization, and is more susceptible to receiving features from the context.

\(^{28}\)Despite lacking */a/ in Fortescue et al.’s reconstructed form for ‘man’, root-final /tɔ/ and /n/ alternate synchronically in Yupik in this and other morphemes (Jacobson 1995:30–31):

   (i) aŋun  (citation form)
   (ii) aŋuɔ-  (base form)

Furthermore, the related proto-forms *aŋutɔkfaq ‘stepfather’ and *aŋutɔviaq ‘male bird’ contain *tɔ.

\(^{29}\)See Archangeli and Pulleyblank (1994:73–84) for an analysis of Barrow Inupiaq that is similar in spirit, though proceeding from different theoretical assumptions.
3.4 Contrastive features in three-vowel dialects

The loss of the fourth vowel results also in a loss of contrast, and this has consequences for the contrastive specification of the remaining vowels. If we retain the contrastive hierarchy in (43), the first feature is [low], which, as before, distinguishes /a/ from the other vowels. The next feature is once again [labial], which applies to /u/. But now we are finished, because all three vowels are in contrast. The loss of the fourth vowel means that the feature [coronal] is not required for any contrastive function. As a result the vowel /i/ now becomes the unmarked vowel with no contrastive [coronal] feature:

\[(47)\] Contrastive hierarchy for /i, a, u/ dialects: [LOW] > [LABIAL]

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{[LOW]} \\
\text{([non-low])}
\end{array}
\begin{array}{c}
\text{[LABIAL]} \\
\text{([non-labial])}
\end{array}
\begin{array}{c}
\text{/a/} \\
\text{/u/} \\
\text{/i/}
\end{array}
\]

\[(48)\] Contrastive specifications in three-vowel dialects:

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{i} \\
\text{[labial]} \\
\text{u} \\
\text{a [low]}
\end{array}
\]

The unmarked status of /i/ in three-vowel dialects is supported by its use in satisfying phonotactic rules in loanwords, as illustrated in the following examples from Labrador (Dorais 1993:97–98):

\[(49)\]

a. matsisi ‘matches’
b. pulisi ‘police’
c. siisi ‘cheese’
d. vaini ‘wine’
e. kuukusi ‘pig’ (from the Innu kûkus)
f. pakaakuani ‘chicken’ (from the Innu pakâkwan)

In order to avoid word-final [s] and [n], which are not possible in Eastern Canadian Inuktitut, /i/ is inserted. This use of /i/ as the default vowel supports its unmarked status in the inventory of three-vowel dialects.

One question remains to be resolved for these three-vowel dialects: if /i/ is characterized only by the unmarked features [−low, −labial], why does it not surface as [ə]? This is tantamount to asking why inventories of the form /i, a, u/ are more common than /a, a, o/. Following the approach taken in Modified Contrastive Specification, we posit that contrastive feature specifications can be enhanced by non-contrastive features that promote the phonetic distinctiveness of the contrastive features (Stevens et al. 1986, Stevens and Keyser 1989, Keyser and Stevens 2001, Dyck 1995, Rice 2002, Hall to appear). Thus, the contrastive feature [−low] is enhanced by [+high], [+labial] (low F2) is enhanced by [+back] (also low F2), and [−labial] is enhanced by [coronal]. That is, if [coronal] is not used as a contrastive feature, it is available to enhance the unmarked features of /i/. It follows, then, that
though /i/ in a three-vowel system has the unmarked status of /a/ in four-vowel systems, it will tend to surface as [i] rather than [o].

3.5 Explaining the typological gap

Crucially, the system we have proposed accounts for the typological gap whereby no three-vowel dialects exhibit palatalization. If palatalization of consonants is triggered by a contrastive feature [coronal] on strong /i/, and if strong and weak /i/ are solely distinguished by this contrastive feature, the loss of the fourth vowel will necessarily consist of the loss of the [coronal] feature, resulting in a loss of palatalization. This shift from a four-vowel dialect to a three-vowel dialect is illustrated in (50).

(50) **Proto-Inuit** | **Four vowels** | **Three vowels**
---|---|---
/a/ | /a/ | /a/  
[LOW] | [LOW] | [LOW]
/u/ | /u/ | /u/  
[LABIAL] | [LABIAL] | [LABIAL]
/i/ | /i/ | /i/  
[CORONAL] | [CORONAL] | ∅
/a/ | /i/ | /i/  
∅ | ∅ | ∅

Accordingly, palatalization should occur only in dialects that have four underlying vowels, and not in dialects with only three underlying vowels.

It is important to note that we are not claiming that /i/ cannot cause palatalization in all three-vowel systems cross-linguistically. We presume that other languages can employ different contrastive hierarchies. Rather, we are arguing that in any three-vowel system, one vowel will lack contrastive features and be unable to trigger phonological activity, while being a likely target for it.

Given that feature ordering is not universally fixed, it is possible in principle for learners to re-analyze a vowel system, assigning new features or a new ordering of features to the contrastive hierarchy. If [coronal] were ordered higher in the feature hierarchy, the result would be that /i/ could trigger palatalization even in a three-vowel system. Our assumption is that feature hierarchies tend to be stable in a language family across time and space, unless a series of changes arise that crucially change the nature of the contrasts that characterize the system. The reason,

---

30There is evidence that [coronal] takes precedence over [labial] in Manchu-Tungusic and Eastern Mongolian vowel systems, with the consequence that /i/ has a marked [coronal] feature whereas /u/ lacks a marked place feature (Dresher and Zhang 2005, Dresher 2009:176–183). Though these are not three-vowel systems, a similar ordering in a three-vowel system would result in /i/ having a marked [coronal] feature and /u/ being the unmarked vowel.

31Zhang (1996) argues that such a change occurred in the modern Manchu dialects, causing them to have a different contrastive hierarchy from the other Manchu-Tungusic languages, with concomitant changes in phonological patterning (see Dresher and Zhang 2005 and Dresher 2009:180–182 for discussion).
presumably, is that the same basic phonological and phonetic evidence that leads learners to set up a particular set of contrasts and hierarchy of features in one dialect exists also in related dialects, barring some radical upheaval that changes the primary evidence. A survey of consonant systems in Inuit dialects (Compton 2008) suggests that the consonantal feature hierarchy is relatively stable across dialects, with some minor local variations. The use of /i/ in three-vowel dialects as the default vowel in loan-word adaptation suggests that /i/ indeed remains contrastively underspecified in these dialects.

4. CONCLUSION

In this article we have argued that we can explain the absence of palatalization in Inuit three-vowel dialects by employing the Contrastivist Hypothesis. If we assume that (i) only contrastive features are phonologically active, (ii) the contrastive feature differentiating strong and weak i in four-vowel dialects is [coronal], and (iii) [coronal] is ordered after the other contrastive features in these dialects, then the merger of these vowels leaves /i/ without contrastive features and unable to trigger palatalization. Thus, this contrastive approach to phonological patterning explains a conspicuous gap in the typology of Inuit dialects.

REFERENCES


APPENDIX: MAP OF INUIT DIALECT GROUPS AND YUPIK LANGUAGES

Adapted from an image at en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Langs_N.Amer.png#filehistory created by ‘Ishwar’ and licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 Generic license. Dialect group boundaries added, using dialect maps from Dorais (2003, 2010) and Fortescue et al. (1994).