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Sound change from the point of view of etymology and grammar

Nganasan stems are divided into two harmonic classes, U stems and I stems, according to Helimski (in Abondolo 1998) and Várnai (in Wagner-Nagy 2000). They claim that the harmonic class “in many cases” or “often” cannot be determined on the basis of the vowels the stem contains. However, the descriptions do not discuss cases when the harmonic class can be determined. My recent research shows that Nganasan vowels can be classified into three sets: U class vowels, I class vowels and neutral or ambivalent vowels. If the stem contains exclusively U class vowels, it will be a U stem and if it contains exclusively I class vowels, it will be an I stem in more than 95% of the cases. If the stem contains both U and I class vowels, vowels of all the three classes or exclusively ambivalent vowels, the stem class is unpredictable (however, it remains fairly predictable in some subpatterns).

Helimski (in Abondolo 1998) claims that this kind of Nganasan vowel harmony originates from a frontness/backness harmony. The vowel chain-shift presented by him suggests that U class vowels were back and I class vowels were front about three or four hundred years ago. But how regular this harmony could be? How did it become more irregular owing to sound changes? How can revealed sound changes in stems can help us to understand grammatical change? Can understanding grammatical changes help us in the reconstruction of stems? These kind of questions arise when we try to understand the history of Nganasan vowel harmony.