

Historical Evidence and Historical Explanation

This paper will focus on the interplay between historical evidence and historical explanation in phonology. Historical evidence will be defined as including the following four subtypes:

- a. Synchronic evidence about a language at any period other than the present.
- b. Comparative evidence from related languages or varieties, including two or more stages of a single language or variety, which differ phonologically.
- c. Variation in a given synchronic system, including alternations and exceptions, which results from the conditioning or partial implementation of a change.
- d. Metatheoretically, attempts to explain b. or c. in terms of the transition from the common ancestral or earlier stage to the later one, or in terms of differences between the grammars of two speakers at these two stages.

It will be shown that, in every case, there is an irreducible connection between these historical questions and evidence types, and synchronic issues, such that none can be removed from the remit of phonology 'proper'. It is also therefore impossible to delimit synchronic and diachronic explanation by applying them simply to synchronic and diachronic evidence respectively, though attempts of this kind have been made, notably in Fleischman's distinction of 'native speaker languages' from 'text languages', or Hale's (2000) dissection of the continuum from Unattested > Rare > Frequent > Universal such that phonology and Universal Grammar are taken to deal with the extremes, while history and diachronic processes are responsible for the middle sections.

However, while phonologists have recently been particularly active in debating the applicability of diachronic explanation, they have not paid so much attention to disparities in the availability of historical evidence. I shall show that historical evidence is far more readily available in segmental phonology, while in prosody historical evidence is sparser and less clear. In part, this mismatch results from the focus of historical phonologists on languages with written records, which typically provide more direct (albeit not fully transparent) representations of vowels and consonants than of stress, quantity, and especially intonation, though to an extent these can be inferred even less directly from their segmental consequences. In part, it follows also from the lack of emphasis in variationist linguistics on prosodic phenomena. If change results from earlier variation, then work on synchronic variation, which may be far more accessible, can teach us about likely patterns of change; but if that variation is not being investigated, then we lose perhaps our only access to diachronic information on some aspects of phonology.

I shall argue, however, that this paucity of diachronic evidence for prosody is not problematic, since the extensive synchronic investigations of syllabification, stress systems and intonation indicate that these are the very areas most clearly amenable to synchronic rather than diachronic explanation. These areas of phonology show clear and repeated patterns of recurrence and early acquisition which lend themselves to analysis using a small number of parameters or potentially innate constraints, which constitute specific-to-language elements of Universal Grammar. In segmental phonology, on the other hand, the contribution of historical explanation is necessarily greater, as the interaction of prior language-specific changes with universal capacities which are not specific to language is the dominant factor here. In the case of phonology, then, it appears that those areas where historical evidence is most accessible and plentiful are also those where diachronic explanation is most apposite.