

PAPER 7
SOUND CHANGE

Traditionally, historical linguistic studies begin with sound change, and comparative studies with phonological reconstruction. No other linguistic research has yielded such a fruitful result in terms of rigorous formulations and significant generalization as the study of phonological history. In many senses we study sound changes not only for its own intrinsic interest and important once, but also because historical studies developed to highest degree of formalization through it. Thus it also explains methods and aims of historical linguistics.

In our daily conversation there are certain words which we pronounce in different ways. Sometimes the difference may be due to social factors, sometimes due to physical factors and sometimes even after reflection. Between the English of Chaucer and that of spoken today probably all entities in the phonological systems have changed.

The constant change taking place in language may lead to modification in sound. For example, the Old English 'hus' [hu:s] appears as 'house' [haws] in Modern English, that is there has been a shift of Old English [u:] to [aw] in Modern English.

CAUSES OF PHONETIC CHANGE

There are various theories that justify the causes of sound change. The first is that sound change is brought about by 'anatomical changes' with the population. Others assign sound change to social, historical reasons and discover a link between political instability and linguistic instability. Then there are 'substratum theories' based on the assumption that the absorption of new comers or immigrants by indigenious population has brought about certain changes. According to the ease theory, sound changes occur because human laziness, indolence, inertia, shirking easygoingness, sluggishness, or whatever beautiful synonyms have been invented for 'economy of effort' or following the line of least resistance. The 'imitation theory' finds the origin of phonetic change, as indeed any other linguistic change, in imitation, whether conscious or unconscious of the speech habits of other people. Just as imitation produces change, so also does resistance to imitation. Lastly, the most important and widespread cause of sound change is the speech interference in the bilingual speakers.

TYPES OF SOUND CHANGE

There are different types of sound change as follows:

1. **LOSS AND ADDITION OF PHONEME:** It is the most obvious type of sound change which may be conditioned or unconditioned. For example, in the shift of Indo-European (IE) to Celtic languages, the phone 'f' was lost in all environments.

| | | |
|----------|--------|----------|
| IE | Irish | |
| * f ter | athair | 'father' |
| * nephto | nie | 'nephew' |

A loss of phoneme may be conditioned by phonological environments. An example

| | | |
|--------|------|---|
| OE | NE | |
| hnecca | neck | (here initial 'h' followed by nasal -n- disappears. |

In the same way, final stops were dropped between the ancient and modern period in North Chinese. For example

| |
|-------------------|
| fap - fa - law |
| fat - pat - eight |

lienk- lin - six

Addition of phoneme is a less common phenomenon.

2. ASSIMILATION: It is the most common type of sound change where one sound becomes more like a neighboring one. It is a very frequent phenomenon in about all the languages of the world.

In terms of articulatory phonetics, assimilation of consonants involves a consonant becoming like another one or more of the three following ways place of articulation, manner of articulation and voicing. It is divided into two broad groups:

(i). Regressive, and

(ii) Progressive

(i) Regressive assimilation means a consonant becomes more like one that follows. In other words, the force of change proceeds backward, from a phoneme to one which precedes it. The N.E. word 'comfort' derived from Old French 'confronter' is an example of regressive assimilation in place of articulation. Here the dental nasal 'n' has become 'm' like the labial fricative 'f'. Thus it has shifted its point of articulation from dental to labial.

(ii) Progressive assimilation takes place when the first phoneme is dominant and in some way makes the second more like itself. It is less common than the regressive assimilation. In it a consonant assumes some of the qualities that precede it. For example:

| | | |
|-------------|----------------|------------|
| Latin | French | N. English |
| homonem | homme | man |
| Old English | Middle English | N. English |
| mylu | mille | mill |

Here O.E. 'lu' cluster becomes 'lle' in M.E.

(iii) LENITON: It is that type of assimilation which involves the changes undergone by consonants when they appear between vowels. Leniton involves two principle processes - stops become continuant and voiceless consonants become voiced.

| | | |
|--------------|--------|--------|
| For example: | O.E. | N.E. |
| | modor | mother |
| | faeder | father |
| | hider | hither |

In the development of Spanish from Latin voicing of consonants between vowels can be seen.

| | | |
|-------|---------|-------|
| Latin | Spanish | |
| ripa | riba | shore |
| fata | fada | fate |

Less frequent than consonant assimilations are vowel assimilations which are known as thulant. They have been observed producing both regressively and progressively. German languages are the most noted example of regressive assimilation of vowels.

| | | |
|-------------|------------------------|------------------|
| For example | O.H.G. sconi - schidne | M.H.G. beautiful |
| | dunni - dunne | thin |

Here we find the shift of back vowels to front ones.

An example of progressive vowel assimilation can be seen in the history of Turkish languages. For example:

| | | |
|---------------|----------------|-------|
| Old Anatolian | Modern Turkish | |
| benum | benim | mine |
| gelup | gelip | going |

(iv) DISSIMILATION: Dissimilation is less common than assimilation. It is a process whereby one of the two similar sounds becomes more differentiated from the other. It is found particularly among more complex sounds.

For example:

| | |
|-----------|---------|
| Latin | N.E. |
| turtur | turtle |
| periginus | pilgrim |

In these examples it is usually the sound of unaccented syllable which is modified.

Dissimilation also may involve the loss of a form segment which is called haplology. For example, modern English adverbs such as gently, simply, and so on made with '-ly' from adjective ending '-le'. Another example is England < Engla land (land of angles).

As a phenomenon of change, haplology is relatively infrequent.

(v) PALATALIZATION: Palatalization is one of the most common types of sound change found in many different languages of the world.

Articulatory - It involves a shift of a consonant to a palatal point of articulation. For example:

| | |
|------|--------|
| O.E. | N.E. |
| ceaf | chaff |
| cese | cheese |
| ceap | cheap |
| cild | child |

In O.E. 'c' generally represents [k] while in N.E. 'ch' is the usual way to write the palatal [c]. Here we find the change from [k] to [c] under the influence of front vowel e or i.

(vi) METATHESIS: Metathesis is such a type of sound change which results from neural rearrangements rather than muscular. Metathesis involves the reversing of the position of the adjoining sounds. For example:

| | | |
|------|------|-------|
| O.E. | M.E. | N.E. |
| brid | bird | bird |
| hros | hors | horse |

However, metathesis is apparently attested only as a sporadic change.

(vii) COMPENSATORY LENGTHENING: A particular type of sound change related to both vowels and consonants is the process known as compensatory lengthening. This situation involves a vowel which is followed by two consonants. When one of the consonants is dropped, the vowel is lengthened in compensation for the last phoneme. It is common in many Indo-European languages.

| | | |
|---------------|-----------|----------|
| Common Celtic | Old Irish | |
| *magl | mal | prince |
| *eta | en | bird |
| *datl | dal | assembly |