

# Historical Linguistics

Week 3, Lecture 2

Phonological change: the Neogrammarians

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# The Neogrammarians

1. Who, when, where?
2. The Neogrammarian principle
3. Apparent exceptions to the Neogrammarian sound-change principle
4. Other possibilities than Neogrammarian regular sound change

# Who, when, where?

- Group of linguists working in and around Leipzig
- Last quarter of 19<sup>th</sup> Century
- Working on Proto-Indo-European (PIE)
- Hermann Paul, Karl Brugmann, Hermann Osthoff ...
- Some sound changes had already been documented
- Rasmus Rask described First Germanic Consonant Shift in 1814
- More commonly known as Grimm's Law (Jakob Grimm)

# The Neogrammarian Principle

‘Every sound change...takes place according to laws that admit no exception’ (among members of the same linguistic community and in the same linguistic environment) – Brugmann in 1878

Corollary:

New forms arise by form association (analogy)

# The Neogrammarian Principle

- For Neogrammarians, Sound Change was unconscious
- This implied that it was mechanical
- Also that it was gradual
- The same regularity principle was applicable to all languages at all periods
- This is known as ‘uniformitarian’

# The Neogrammarian Principle

- Summary:
  - Any sound change must apply without exception
  - Sound changes apply simultaneously to all applicable words
  - Apply simultaneously to all speakers
  - Purely phonetically conditioned
  - Gradual (in actual change of the sound(s))
  - Any changes not fitting these not labelled sound changes

# The Neogrammarian Principle

- Is the Neogrammarian principle
  - an empirical claim?
  - a definition?
  - a methodological principle?
- Also known as the *regularity hypothesis*
- In part an attempt to prove that diachronic linguistics more scientific than synchronic

# Apparent exceptions

1. Analogy
2. False etymology (items not cognate)
3. Borrowing (item not in the language at the relevant time)
4. Sub-regularity (not true exceptions)
5. ‘Sporadic changes’ (exceptions to *gradualness*, not necessarily to regularity)
6. Interference (two competing sound laws)
7. a) ‘wrong time’ b) ‘wrong place’
8. Sound symbolism/affective vocabulary (items not cognate, or not wholly so)

# Apparent exceptions

- Analogy (English):
  - sg. *glof* pl. *gloves* : > sg. *glove*
  - sg. *cliff* pl. *clives* : > pl. *cliffs*
- False etymology:
  - Eng. *day* Lat. *dies* (not cognate)
  - Lat. *deus* Gk *theos* ‘god’ (not cognate)
  - Goth. *haban* Lat *habere* ‘have’  
(*haban* is cognate with Lat. *capere* ‘seize’)

# Apparent exceptions

- Borrowings (English):
  - *dental* (Lat) *dentalis*
  - *paternal* (Lat) *pater*
- Subregularity:
  - Some apparent exceptions to Grimm's law
  - Verner's law: reanalysis of classes

# Apparent exceptions

- Sporadic changes:
  - Dissimilation:
    - Lat. peregrin > It. pellegrino 'pilgrim'
  - Distance assimilation:
    - Lat. penkwe > kwenkwe > It. cinque 'five'
  - Metathesis:
    - O.E. bridd > N.E. bird
    - O.E. frist > N.E. first
    - BUT O.E. bricg > N.E. bridge

# Apparent exceptions

- 'Wrong time':
  - Latin regular sound change:  $s > r / V\_V$
  - *genesa* > *genera*
  - Later  $ss > s / V\_$
  - *causa* (< *caussa*), *caesus* (< *caessus*)
- 'Wrong place':
  - N.E. *vat*, *vixen*, borrowed from S. dialects of English

# Apparent exceptions

- Sound symbolism (onomatopoeia):
  - Eng. cuckoo, Lat. cuculus
- Affective forms:
  - Welsh tad, Rumanian tată 'father'

# Other possibilities

- Alternatives to Neogrammarian principle:
  1. Some changes are not 'regular' (i.e.  $x$  possible outcomes,  $x > 1$ )
  2. Lexical diffusion – change spreads word by word
  3. Sound change may be grammatically conditioned
- NGP accepted by most linguists for a long time
- Alternative theories put forward eventually, when problems became clear

# Changes not regular

- PIE  $j >$  Greek  $\eta$  or  $\zeta$
- One set of words has  $\eta$
- Another set has  $\zeta$
- Not determined by phonetic context
- Not determined by grammatical context
- Not determined by dialect or time differences

# Lexical diffusion

- Not all words affected at once
- Some groups or individual words may get 'left behind'
- O.E. o > u in food
- > ʊ in good
- > ʌ in blood

# Grammatical conditioning

- Position held by anti-Neogrammarians, like G. Curtius, H. Schuchardt
- (Schuchardt given a very rough ride by NGs, mocked throughout his life)
- Idea reintroduced by Paul Postal
- Changes in English grammatical (function) words to the fricatives a good example
- Changes may affect one word class

# Summary

- Neogrammarians at forefront of scientification of linguistics
- Regularity hypothesis antidote to synchronic irregularity
- All explained by historical regularity
- Principle needed to be toned down slightly
- Not a bad working hypothesis
- Only addresses phonological change