

## Historical linguistics – lecture 5 GENERATIVE GRAMMAR AND SOUND CHANGE

*‘What really changes is not sounds, but grammars’*

Where Structuralists said that *phonemes change* Generativists said that *rules change*. **Generative phonology** established itself as an important approach in synchronic theoretical linguistics in the late 1960s.

In line with the earlier American structuralists, the focus tended not to be on the **causes or explanation of language change**.

- The question was sometimes trivialized as a fact of the human condition equivalent to changing fashions in clothing or innovations in automobile design (Postal 1968:283).
- The emphasis during this period was on the description of language change in terms of grammar change. “Change occurs because the grammar of the language has changed, and the largely random effects of performance have nothing to do with it” (King 1969:15).

In early generative phonology, the phonological component consisted of an ordered set of rules that mapped underlying representations onto surface representations (Chomsky & Halle 1968).

/underlying representation/

→ rule 1

→ rule 2

→ rule n

[surface representation].

Accordingly, two types of grammar change were identified; **primary change** involving the rule system and **restructuring** or relexicalization involving a change in the underlying form (King 1969:39).

Four subtypes of primary change were originally proposed; **rule addition, rule reordering, rule simplification, and rule loss**.

**rule addition** - IE /b, d, g/ → /p, t, k/

**rule reordering** – final devoicing and vowel lengthening in the history of German

lob ‘praise’ – veg ‘path’

After final devoicing was introduced, around 1000 another change lengthened vowels before voiced consonants. As a result nom. [lop] – gen. [lo:bəs], [vek] – [ve:gə]. But in Modern German [lo:p] – [lo:bəs], [ve;k] – [ve:gə]. This change can be seen as resulting from rule reordering

**rule loss** – loss of fricative voicing in the history of English

As in the case of the earlier structuralists, **simplification** is assumed by generativists to be the primary, if not sole, factor in phonological change, but is now considered the driving force behind changes to phonological rules and rule sets. The emphasis on simplification is also evident in the treatment of what is considered the primary source of change, namely, **language acquisition** where simplicity is viewed as the crucial factor in the child’s setting up of a grammar. King (1969:77-78) assumes that children optimise (simplify) grammars during the acquisition process, whereas adults can only add rules.

### **restructuring:**

in some varieties of English /hw/ contrasted with /w/ - whales ≠ Wales. Later /hw/ → [w] as a result of rule addition. Adults could only add this rule, and so retained /hw/ in *whales* underlyingly. Children, however, in constructing their grammar would arrive at a simpler grammar where [w] is the surface realisation of /w/. The rule /hw/ → [w] has been lost, but its results are now incorporated into underlying representation, and a simpler rule system results.

#### Problems with standard generative approach

- ❑ they view phonological change as simplification. This is problematic as some rules introduce more complexity (creating irregularities), others are not simplificatory (sound shifts)
- ❑ the exact definition of simplification is a relative rather than an absolute matter
- ❑ the early approaches tended to model synchronic grammar as a compendium of historical rules, as this famous quote from Chomsky and Halle's SPE indicates: "underlying representations are fairly resistant to historical change, which tends, by and large, to involve late phonetic rules. If this is true, then the same system of representation for underlying forms will be found over long stretches of space and time." This is connected with the abstractness debate within Generative phonology.

The later generative approaches sought to move beyond a mere recapitulation of history, i.e. beyond the simple description of changes in a language's history, toward an explanation of them including both the **actuation** and **transmission**. Recall that for **Neogrammarians** sound change is imperceptible and operates simultaneously for all speakers and all lexical items – this practically means that transmission is inaccessible for investigation, for **Structuralists** what matters is the change/or its lack in the inventory of phonemes, for **Generativists** the change in the system of rules. Both **S** and **G** compare and describe two stages in the development of a language but give us no insight into the interval between these two stages, i.e. how the change propagated.

At its inception, generative phonology represented a rejection of many of the tenets and assumptions of previous approaches. In rejecting the Neogrammarians' assumed phonetic basis of sound change, King (1969:123) argues that morphological conditioning plays an essential role in phonological change. This discussion continues with Labov (1994:604) primarily in agreement with the neogrammarian position and Kiparsky (1988:372-373) noting problematic aspects.

### **References**

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