

Romance Lenition: Towards A Formal Account of A Contrast Maintaining Phonetically Motivated Sound Change

Lenition, the weakening of consonants in ‘intervocalic’ position (intervocalic meaning a consonant preceded by a vowel and followed by either a vowel, liquid, glide or nasal) is traditionally (Bichakjian 1977) considered in the Romance languages to form a unified sound change, beginning with the spirantization of single intervocalic voiced stops, followed by the voicing of single intervocalic voiceless obstruents and finally by the degemination of geminates.

The forms in (1), taken from Jacobs and Wetzels (1988), show its effects in the historical phonology of French. The spirantized voiced stops were subsequently lost, the original voiceless stops after voicing further underwent spirantization and the full change was completed by the time of Old French. The forms in (2), taken from Dinnsen and Eckman (1977), show that it is still synchronically operative in other Romance varieties, such as Corsican.

(1)	Classical Latin		Gallo-Romance	Old French	
SPIRANTIZATION (3 rd century)					
habere	[habe:re]	>	[aβere]	aveir, avoir	‘to have’
nudum	[nu:dum]	>	[nuðu]	nu	‘naked’
negare	[nega:re]	>	[neyare]	neier, nier	‘to deny’
VOICING (4 th -6 th century)					
ripam	[Ri:pam]	>	[Riba] > [Riβa]	rive	‘bank’
locare	[loka:re]	>	[logare] > [loɣare]	loer, loier	‘to rent’
vitam	[wi:tam]	>	[vida] > [viða]	vie	‘life’
pesare	[pe(n)sa:re]	>	[pezare]	peser	‘to weigh’
malefatius	[malefatium]	>	[malevatju]	malvais	‘unhappy, bad’
DEGEMINATION (7 th -8 th century)					
guttam	[gut:am]	>	[gotɛ]	gote	‘drop’
cappam	[kap:am]	>	[tʃapɛ]	chape	‘coat’
occultus	[ok:ultus]	>	[okult]	occult	‘secret’
(2) Corsican					
VOICING					
[peðe]	‘foot’		[ubeðe]		‘the foot’
[teŋgu]	‘I have’		[udeŋgu]		‘I have it’
[kaza]	‘house’		[uɣaza]		‘he house’
SPIRANTIZATION					
[bok:a]	‘mouth’		[aβok:a]		‘the mouth’
[dente]	‘tooth’		[uðente]		‘the tooth’
[gola]	‘throat’		[diyola]		‘of throat’

Lenition is well-studied from both a traditional as well as a theoretical perspective. The traditional structuralist view (expressed by Martinet 1955) considers lenition to be a chain shift in which each step took place without loss of phonological distinctness. This view has received broad typological support. Gurevich (2004) studies 230 lenition processes in some 153 languages and finds that in the majority of cases (92%) lenition processes indeed do avoid neutralization. A first formalization of the contrast maintaining properties of lenition has been proposed in Jacobs and Wetzels (1988) who offer an underspecification approach, in which each step leads to a new set of lexical representations. Jacobs (1996) notes that the underspecification approach is unable to straightforwardly account for synchronic allophonic lenition processes where voicing and spirantization take place simultaneously, as in for instance Corsican in (2), and discusses a possible OT-analysis. That analysis, however, relies crucially on keeping apart original voiceless and voiced stops, by having Parse-feature constraints referring to input segmental properties, contrary to standard OT assumptions on Input-Output featural correspondance.

One of the reasons for devoting attention again to Romance lenition is its relevance to the actual theoretical debate of how to handle opacity in OT. The Corsican examples in (2), constitute a clear case of counter-feeding opacity. Moreover, on the reasonable assumption that both spirantization and voicing belong to the same level, even a level-based OT model would not be able to provide a satisfactory account for the Corsican data.

In our paper, we will first critically discuss the above-mentioned previous analyses. After that, we will propose an account based on McCarthy's (2002) Comparative markedness theory and show how it permits to directly express the contrast maintaining property of lenition.

References

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