

Patterns of lexical diffusion and articulatory motivation for sound change

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One aspect of phonological change that can be used to develop a typology of sound change is lexical diffusion (Labov 1981, Hooper 1976, Phillips 1984, 2006 and Bybee 2001). Recent research has replaced the earlier division between lexical diffusion changes and Neogrammarian changes (as proposed in Labov 1981) by showing that even changes that appear to be phonetically conditioned and that end up as lexically regular often extend gradually through the lexicon starting with high frequency words and gradually affecting words of lower frequency (Schuchardt 1885, Hooper 1976, Phillips 2006 and others).

I have argued in various places (Hooper 1976, Bybee 2001) that changes which start in high frequency words and phrases and extend to other words and phrases are congruent with an articulatory motivation or cause, as neuromotor activities in general that are highly practiced tend to lead to greater fluency, expressed by overlapping and reduction of gestures. It follows that phonological changes that do not arise out of articulatory reduction are likely to have a different pattern of lexical diffusion.

In this paper I add support to the hypothesis of a gestural basis for sound change by proposing that the reductive patterns of increased gestural overlap, blending and reduction in magnitude (Browman and Goldstein 1990, 1992) explain a large range of documented sound changes. A related hypothesis—that increased overlap is anticipatory—leads to the testable propositions that (1) changes describable as anticipatory assimilations are more frequent than perseverative or carry-over assimilations and (2) the latter, to the extent they are found, are due to gestural blending. Further support for the second hypothesis is that carry-over assimilations (as predicted by Recasens 1999), tend to involve large and less mobile articulators, such as the tongue body.

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