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Accent, a Chief Factor in Linguistic Change

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The connection between the topic of my paper and the general theme of this Congress may not be immediately obvious, but will, I hope, emerge from my remarks. When I say "linguistic change", I should really make it clear that it is only phonological change I have in mind and take the latter as the generic term covering both allophonic variation and phonemic change. Phonological change may start with allophonic variation due to a specific environment and remain on the allophonic level as long as the conditioning factors remain unchanged; as the conditioning factors lapse, the mode of realization acquires phonemic status, if it does not lapse together with them. On the other hand, phonological change may from the beginning be irrespective of the phonetic environment and offer us no tangible allophonic variations as evidence of a transitional stage. If we now take up the problem of causation, the following avenues of approach suggest themselves from a purely theoretical point of view:

1. The cause of the sound change is to be sought in the nature of the speech sound alone, in its "Eigenart", as *Brugmann* called it when he formulated this view.
2. We must study the totality of the phonemes and their phonetic realization.
3. The cause at least of conditioned sound change lies in the phonetic environment.
4. The ultimate cause of phonological change lies beyond the phonemic pattern.

We will quite briefly discuss these various possibilities. *Brugmann's* point of view embodies the old "atomistic" approach, which we even find hard to understand nowadays, with all due respect to our predecessors. It becomes obvious from the study of any group

of genetically related languages that *Brugmann's* proposition must be inadequate, because these languages, with their different phonological structures, proceed from what were originally identical phonemes.

Approach 2. endeavors to overcome the atomistic approach. The phonemes are arranged in certain patterns based on the classification of their physiological or, more recently, acoustic qualities. In this way, our urge to study facts not in their isolation, but in their interrelation with a Gestalt character seems to be satisfied. Various symmetries and asymmetries naturally emerge from these arrangements; somewhere, gaps emerge in the pattern, or else some phonemes do not fit into them at all and remain on the outside. It then becomes natural to look for the causes of instability in these disharmonies within the system. Despite all the evidence suggested by entropy in the surrounding universe, it is tacitly assumed that there is inherent in this system a tendency to arrive at some sort of pre-established harmony, to abolish dissymmetries and fill in gaps; altogether, the pattern, which is really nothing but the result of our abstractions, is being endowed with some kind of immanent force. Please do not believe that I wish to belittle the validity or usefulness of the phonemic pattern – at the synchronic level; but that it presides over the drift of phonological change I do not believe. We will, therefore, regard this approach as nothing but an interesting attempt to take a structuralist view of diachronic change, based on a notion of linguistic structure that differs from ours.

Now for 3., the phonetic environment. Here it is time to give a concrete example of what I have in mind. Both Germanic and Slavic started out from one common form with their word for the "lie", say **lugi*. The phonemes with their "Eigenart" as well as the phonetic environment were identical. What about the phonetic realization? To take Germanic first, the realization of the consonantal phonemes was not significantly affected by the ensuing vowels, neither the *l* got velarized under the impact of the following back vowel nor the *g* significantly palatalized by the following front vowel. What allophonic variation there may have been in the *g* did not lead to the establishment of a new phoneme. But we get something else in Germanic instead; the first vowel developed into *ü*, at first only a fronted allophone of *u*, under the impact of the front vowel following in the next syllable, and this acquired phonemic status as soon as the original front vowel changed its nature in the history of

German. Thus we had in this particular stage of Germanic no significant changes due to the phonetic environment within the same syllable, but on the other hand a marked transsyllabic effect (not due to a palatalization of the intervening consonant).

Things were different in Slavic. Here, the *l* was velarized by the following *u*, giving rise to a velar variant that eventually acquired phonemic status where it became independent of the back versus front character of the ensuing vowel due to subsequent phonological changes. In the second syllable, the *g* was shifted to the prepalatal region by the action of the ensuing *i*: *gi* > *ži*, and subsequently, a new phoneme *ž* came about. Also in Slavic, the vowels changed, but irrespective of each other, that is to say, without any transsyllabic effect, resulting in Slavic [*lüžĩ*] as against N.H.G. [*ly:gə*]. I have no time to go into the details of this development, but I view it against the background of the Slavic "musical" accentuation.

And here we come up against approach 4., factors beyond the phonemes and their patterns. We subsume these factors under the term "accentuation" which, in an adaptation of *A. Schmitt's* excellent definition, is nothing but the statement of the relationship between the syllables of the word or word-group in terms of intensity. He calls the accent of Germanic "strongly centralizing", that is to say, the accented syllable strongly dominates the unaccented ones, closely knitting the syllables together into the phonetic word. Such a definition is perfectly in keeping with the transsyllabic developments in Germanic of which I could only give you one example. From the autonomous, as I have called it, development in the Slavic syllables, however, we may infer a more even character of the accentuation allowing more scope for the interplay of vowels and consonants within the same syllable.

I cannot, in the brief time at my disposal, give more than a few examples from two more or less diametrically opposed accentual types. There is, then, on the one hand, the Old Slavic with its even accentuation, with its consonants and vowels evolving regardless of the place of the accent, but in close conjunction with each other within the syllable. The phonemes develop allophonic varieties and eventually change phonemic status in accordance with the following 3 factors:

- a) along the lines laid down by their nature (*Eigenart*), i.e. their physiological or auditory criteria;
- b) the framework established by the neighboring phonemes, in

the special case of Slavic, in the great majority of cases within the same syllable only, and

c) in connection with b), under the effect of a particular type of accentuation that treated, generally speaking, all syllables alike. When I call accentuation something "beyond" the phonemes, this should be understood as exhibiting the same relationship as that of the pattern to its constituent parts. It is something over and above the elements and yet pervading them. In the case of speech, this overall pattern is, in accordance with the one dimension of speech, the succession and gradation, in terms of intensity, of the phonetic units of speech – the syllables.

In fact, in Germanic we find the same principle at work not only as between the successive syllables of the phonetic word, strongly dominated by one accent, but also within the syllabic nucleus itself. West Germanic provides many good examples of one part of a long and accented vowel differing greatly in its tension from another part, resulting in the establishment of a diphthong. Thus, the perfectly symmetrical pattern of the inherited six long vowels was upset in O.H.G. by the diphthongization *ō, ē* > *oa, ea* > *ua, ia*, etc., the forerunner of the N.H.G. diphthongization. Slavic, which we have taken as the opposite, in many ways, of the Germanic development, contracted on the contrary all the I.-E. diphthongs and, moreover, coordinated the resulting monophthong with the character of the preceding tautosyllabic consonant. Diphthongization also characterizes the development of the Romance languages out of local Latin dialects that had evolved a marked accent of intensity (cf. French *poire* < *pera*, Spanish *pierdo* – *perdemos*, etc.).

This is how we imagine the accentual principle to work: the accentual pattern of the word or word-group precedes in the speech centers the realization of the individual phoneme and their sequence, imposing certain features on them, in accordance with the proposition that the whole precedes the part. The accent, by no means a mysterious entity, is nothing but the organizing principle of the phonetic whole (not a delimitative sign, etc.). This principle asserts itself in the mutual relationship of the syllables in terms of intensity. In itself, "accentuation" is nothing but a generic term, whose concrete content varies from one language to another. By postulating the dominance of this factor in phonological change, we are only trying to bring linguistics into line with contemporary science, many of whose concepts defie material definitions and are seen to be mere

expressions of relationship. Accent, as a suprasegmental feature, is not on a line with the phonemes, but hierarchically dominating them, so that both synchronic realization and diachronic change alike take their cue from it.

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